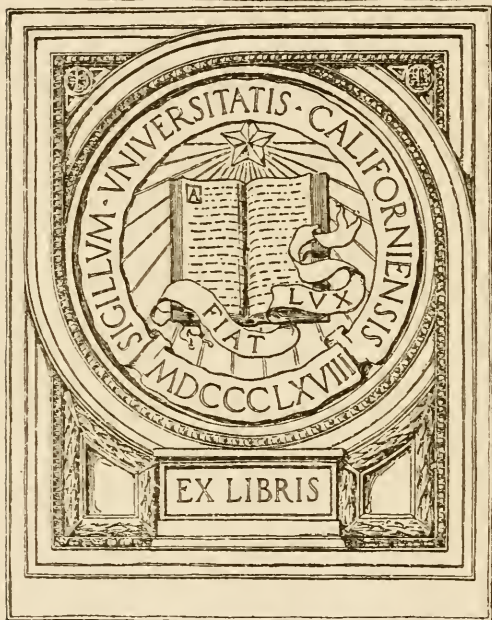


THE CHARMING OF
ESTERCELL

GRACE RHYE

GIFT OF
Knights of St. Patrick



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THE CHARMING OF ESTERCEL

NEW NOVELS

THE LOST MAMELUKE

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J. M. DENT & SONS LIMITED

THE CHARMING OF ESTERCEL

BY
GRACE RHYS



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PREFACE

Two old spells almost opposite in kind, one of love, the other of love and hate, are woven into this tale. According to the first, if a ring is put into a bird's nest in the spring-time and removed only when the young are ready to fly, it will be so impregnated with the spirit of love as to cast a charm on whoever wears it. According to the other, if a young girl uses the mirror of a wanton she inherits the spirit of guile left behind there. It is easy to see that these two beliefs are complementary of each other; being little allegories of substance by which we divine the powers of the gentle and ungentle influence.

The character of Essex and the intrigues of the day have been studied from the state records of that extraordinary time. Many curious things are to be found there; one can discover how apt are private passions, when swollen and inflated, to become affairs of state; we can find how an astute man, grown powerful, may use a whole kingdom as a weapon against his enemy: such is the story of Essex and Cecil.

As for Estercel's great horse, Tamburlaine, he is true to the life or horse-nature, not of one, but of many

horses which the present writer has had exceptional chances of observing. The episode of the horse's revenge, of the hoof mark left on the enemy's heart, is absolutely true, and the spot where the tragedy occurred is well known.

GRACE RHYS.

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THE CHARMING OF ESTERCEL

CHAPTER I

THE RING

YOUNG Mistress Sabia lay on her nurse's neck.

From the window high up in the grey walls of Ardhoree Castle the nurse could see the spring woods descending, pouring down the castle slopes in waves of purple, snow white, and faint green.

But young Mistress Sabia turned her face from the delight of the window and buried it, sighing, in her nurse's bosom. Above the brown head the old face was wrinkled and lined as if with the handwriting of a hundred years, but the hollow eyes beamed with love.

"I think," said Sabia, sighing once more, "there is something the matter with me, Nurse Phaire."

"Pulse of my heart," answered the nurse, "is it sickening you are, or what?"

Sabia lifted her up head, then turned again and gazed upon the floor. Her brown cheek was flushed red and her hands were pressed together. She shook back the mass of curls that fell from under her ribbon, half turned towards her nurse, and spoke, using a most pitiful voice.

"I have a pain somewhere," she said.

"And where, my jewel?" asked the nurse, anxiously.

"It is in my heart, nurse," cried Mistress Sabia, suddenly flinging her arms about the old woman's neck

2. THE CHARMING OF ESTERCEL

and sobbing aloud. "I never meant to tell, but when I am without a mother, and father is full of trouble and weighty affairs, whom have I to find comfort with but you?"

"What's this you're telling me now?" said the nurse, doubtfully; then all at once reading the secret half discovered by the flushed cheek and the sighing mouth, she cried, "Ah, my lamb and my heart's treasure, you're not after giving your heart away, and you so young?"

"Indeed and I have not given it away," answered the young girl. "It has gone from me by no will of my own and left an empty place behind. Night and day I am in trouble from it, and by no wish of my own at all. Last year, I remember, I was happy, and now that seems so long ago."

"And who in the world, child, is it that your heart has gone seeking after?"

The young girl hesitated a moment, then turned and whispered in the nurse's ear: "It is my cousin Estercel. It is a great pity, but he is not caring for me at all."

"Well, well, well;" and, "well, well, well, to be sure," said the old woman, softly, as she patted her charge; "and it not so long since you were children together!"

"He is twenty-one years old, and a man, nurse," said Sabia.

"That is a great age, indeed," said the old woman, smiling.

But Sabia only sighed and pressed her hands together upon her bosom.

"It is a dreadful sorrow," she said. "I could not have imagined that I should suffer like this. Perhaps I shall die."

The nurse looked anxiously upon her; the flushed

cheek was thinner than it had used to be; the small fingers had surely grown finer. The old woman turned the delicate face round between her two hands and examined it; there at the base of the forehead's arch each brow's edge was sharper, and her eyes burned with a painful look.

"My darling love," said the old woman, as she gazed; "and there was I thinking it was nothing but the spring weather—sure that was why I was giving you a little morning dose."

"I never took it, nurse," said Sabia. "I always poured it out of the window. I have been most unhappy. If I cannot have some love to call my own, I would rather die."

"It will come, my child; have patience, and it will come. A face like my darling's will surely gather love."

"I cannot find patience any more," said Sabia, sadly. "All day and all night I am tormented. And here is a strange thing, Nurse Phaire: all day and all night I am longing for my cousin Estercel to come, and when I do see him riding to the door I am forced to go away to hide. I cannot bear that he should look at me. Nurse, you know when the sun shines in the middle of the blue sky, you cannot look up without being blinded. That is how my cousin Estercel's eyes appear to me; like the sun in a shining blue sky. And, oh, nurse, the curls of his hair! They are like the colour of the sun itself; and I am so ugly and dark and brown. It is no wonder he will not look at me."

"What!" said the old woman, in indignation. "He not look at my girl, and she an O'Neil and the heiress of Ardhoroe, and he only an O'Neil on his grandmother's side, and that three times removed?"

"You are forgetting now that my father will marry again, nurse," said Sabia, seriously. "And my cousin Estercel has no covetous mind. He is not the man to go hunting castles. It is only that he does not care for me. And he never will; of that I am sure; and I shall be lonely till I die," and down fell her tears.

"Hush, now, hush; and never fear, my precious jewel," said the nurse, taking her to her bosom. "He shall turn to love you as sure as the sun shines this day. We will find a good plan. I will be thinking now that my child may have her wish."

She rocked the young girl to and fro upon her knee while she gazed out upon the rolling woods, and every wrinkle in her old face seemed as wise as a hundred years.

Presently she spoke. "There is a drink we could be giving him," she said, musing, "if I could mind what to put in it. This was how my grandmother used to be saying it"—she still rocked her nursling, while she bent her ear sideways, as if listening far down the past: "'Take the blood of a black hen, seven spiders' stones, the ashes of a ram's thigh-bone . . .'"

"No, no, nurse," cried Sabia, leaving the old woman's knee and moving to the casement. "I do not like that at all. You need not tell me any more of it."

"Just as you please, my lamb, just as you please. And, indeed, that drink is troublesome to make; and since you are not liking it, maybe I can find some other way."

Still keeping her place on the low oak chair, she rested her elbows upon her knees and her white-capped head upon her hands.

Sabia stood by the window, gazing, a small, slight

figure, too sensitive, one would have said, for solitary battling in such stormy days.

"There is a charm that I mind now," said the nurse at last, "and I never heard tell of it failing. You must take a ring and put it in a bird's nest for the whole season of the spring; and when it is well warmed through with bird-love and the young are ready to fly, you must give it to the person upon whom you have placed your love, and in a while it is sure that he will love you back again."

Sabia turned her face eagerly upon her nurse, and then her look again faded. "Ah, but," she said, "my cousin Estercel has great hands and fingers. Where will I find a man's ring to put in the nest?"

"Mistress Sabia," said the nurse, "the brooches and the chains and the rings that were my lady your mamma's, that's now in glory, are all put by for you till you come to be eighteen years of age, and the case they are in is in the old press in the blue chamber, and the key of the press is upon my bunch. Shall we go now and search and see if there is a man's ring amongst them?"

Sabia sprang forward and seized her nurse's hand to pull her from the chair. "We will go down at once," she cried.

Then together they descended to the long room below. It was lit by three narrow windows, and at one end was a great bed of state in faded blue, holding the secret of many a birth and death of that dwindled house.

Against the wall, facing the blue bed, was a tall cupboard of black oak carved with curious figures strangely spreading their feet and hands.

Having closed the door, the nurse chose a key from her dangling bunch; opening an inner drawer, she drew

out a velvet case, once purple, now faded to a score of different hues.

The old woman carried the case to the bed, while Sabia eagerly followed her; together they opened it and gazed upon its contents. The box was very old; within, the jewels lay heaped together, emitting faint rays of light. Sabia put out a half reluctant hand, lifted them one by one, and laid them on the bed.

Two gold chains she laid out, then a necklace of brilliants, set in solid silver, chased and tarnished; large, heavy bracelets encrusted with various coloured stones; two worked brooches of the old Celtic fashion, both of gold; a waist-chain, and a gem for the forehead.

Then the nurse picked up something that lay at the bottom of the box. "See here, rose of my heart," she cried, holding it up. "This is a man's ring, sure enough."

Sabia seized upon it; but as she looked, blank disappointment spread over her face. It was a huge old ring of silver, of a great weight, with a narrow band, and a tower raised upon it, on the top of which was a rough but ingenious carving of a city, cut out of a blood-stone. Sabia looked despairingly upon it.

"Oh, nurse," she said, "you know very well Estercel would never wear so stupid a ring! And then think of the poor little birds!"—she smiled up in her nurse's face;—"a thing so large and heavy, it would be worse than a cuckoo in the nest."

"Give it here to me, child," said the nurse, taking it and weighing it in her hand. "No, this would never do; and now it is in my mind that one Sunday morning my blessed lady your mamma showed me this ring in this very room, and told me it was the ring of the Lord Bishop Decies, who was her own grand-uncle. And

more by token, look, here is the likeness of the city of Jerusalem on the top. That would be the terrible blasphemy for us to be putting the Holy City for a nest of little birds to sit upon."

But Sabia seemed to care nothing for Jerusalem, nor for the Lord Bishop's ring with that city on the top; without heeding her nurse, she still continued her search in the bottom of the box, nor did she pay more heed to the jewels laid out upon the bed. It was a wonder to see a young girl caring nothing for the bright stones and the gold; but jewels belong to the joy of love, and sorrow of the heart will scarcely reach out a hand for them.

At length Sabia raised her head. "See this one, nurse!" she cried. "Would not this one do?" and she held out a ring of gold, wide and thin.

The nurse took it from her and carried it to the window; they stood together and examined it under the light; it was worn and slender, a hoop of seven wires of twisted gold, ending in a bird's head.

"Ah, Mistress Sabia," said the nurse, "this is the very ring for the charm; for look now, it has been carried for long years on some man's finger, and by the feel of it upon my hand I can tell that it was worn in love. Take it now in your hand and see; there is trouble in the ring and much love; it is hardly cold yet after God knows how many years."

She placed the ring in the palm of Sabia's hand, and tightly folding her fingers over it, bade her close her eyes.

The young girl turned pale as she stood, her face still raised to the light of the window; the ring seemed to burn in her hand. For a moment she waited, then

opened her eyes. "Oh, it is true, Nurse Phaire!" she said. "It is alive. I can believe it."

"Hold it, Mistress Sabia," said the nurse. "It must not be left cold again. It must be warmed now with another love, that it may bring happiness to you. Look, I will put it in your bosom to keep until you find a nest," and she tucked the ring safely within the folds of the girl's dress, over against her heart.

"I will go now, nurse, to the woods. I will go this very moment," said Sabia, eagerly. "The afternoon is early yet, and the bushes are full of nests. Oh, I am so glad I told you! My heart is lighter already."

"Take the greyhound with you, child, if you will go; he is watchful and obedient. Ah me! that these old bones can no longer go wandering through the blessed green bushes; but the Holy Power be thanked, I have still the sight of my eyes, and can look down from the window and see you go. Now I will call Mary to bring your hood; she shall go with you too, and Dermot shall follow behind. The times are rough, and my brown darling must go safe."

"And at the back of Dermot a troop of horsemen to ride the bushes while I go staring into a sparrow's nest?" said Sabia, laughing now. "No, indeed, nurse, alone and in secret I will go. I will not have the charm spoiled by the eyes and gossip of a man and a maid. But I will take Lawdir, because he is a discreet dog and will neither look nor tell again. And now I myself will go and get my hood, and slip out of the little gate," and with a cheerful face she sped away.

"Mistress Sabia! Mistress Sabia!" cried the old woman, hobbling along the passage. "Come back and listen to me. You shall change that green gown for

a worse. I will not have that fine embroidery torn in the bushes. Put on the old gown, child of my heart; it will not matter for that one."

But Sabia would not listen, and presently she came hastening wilfully by, her white hood in her hand; and the nurse was so full of joy to see the brighter face and bearing that she only smiled and caught her by the sleeve as she said:

"Well, stay a moment, for a naughty maiden, then, and let Nurse Phaire put the hood on straight."

Then with her old hands that trembled she carefully hooded the brown head, smoothed the locks upon the forehead, stroking away an imaginary speck upon the small round chin, feeding her fond love on nearness of sight and touch, very loth to let her darling go.

But Sabia would not stay; she twitched her sleeve from the old woman's hands, and hurrying away, turned down a little stone stairway, which led out by a small arched door upon a smooth green slope that ran steeply down to the moat below.

CHAPTER II

THE NEST

SABIA went down to the moat-side where a broad plank had been laid across. By the side of it she paused and whistled three times. While the last note was on her lips a greyhound came bounding round the castle wall, and coursing towards her, fawned at her feet. She stooped and stroked him and spoke kindly to him, till the hound grew wild with joy.

He sprang up, with his forefeet upon her shoulders, and then she chid him till his head drooped, and he fell soberly behind as she turned. Very lightly she crossed the plank that rose and fell under her step, and running down the farther slope, was soon safe among the bushes.

Joy was in her feet as they sped along; like tiny wayward children, they danced in their hurrying to and fro. She had nursed her loneliness and sorrow so long in secret that unburdening and the entering hope made a new day for her.

Everything about her was sharing in her joy. Green buds in showers gemmed the boughs. A rustle of life that stirred filled the air, and over and through it cried the ecstatic songs of the birds; everything living was rejoicing because of its mate.

Sabia rejoiced also; for hope and an innocent imagination painted the image of Estercel before her in livelier, yet more delicate, colours than the seen love brings

to any created eye. The ring that was to charm him was clasped to her heart with one hand, while with the other she parted the boughs to gaze into the secret hiding-places of the spring.

From her earliest childhood Sabia had made companions of the birds; she knew them well, their names and their song, their looks and their behaviour, and now she was pondering deeply to which of them all she should deliver the treasure of her ring.

The fighting doves she would not trust, even if, with the terror of her nurse before her eyes, she dared to climb so very high in her good gown with the wide sleeves and her snow-white underdress.

The thrush she loved with her whole heart; she knew him for a kind soul with a great angelic song; but when she looked into his nest she could not bear to trust her ring to that clay bottom. The blackbird had a better nest, and for a while she hesitated by one, fresh built in a thorn; but while she waited, up came the shining black cock with a fierce shriek, his broad rustling tail expanded, his bill like gold in the sun, and his jewelled eye upon her. She drew away, shaking her head at him; she knew him, too, and how all the birds ran before him at the winter feeding. Neither he nor any of his rearing should have her ring.

By more than one nest she paused and waited. Should the robin take it? He was our Lord's own bird; she would wish that breast with its holy stain pressed against her ring; but upon every day in the year, except Good Friday only, he, too, was fighting; so neither would she think of him.

From the beautiful wren's house, too, she turned away; he, the most impious and the most unfortunate

of all the birds, who now for more than sixteen hundred years had paid for his transgression in the hunting of each St. Stephen's day—he, poor wretch, once guilty of that fearful laughter, should never nurse her ring.

Dreaming and searching, and pausing here and there, she came at last to a small open space that seemed like a safe green chamber in the descending wood. Below, seen through the trees' arch, glittered a small bright lake. All around, the songs of the birds still continued; for this was the time of year when they can scarcely sleep for joy. Beginning now to be tired, Sabia sat down to rest for a moment on the well-mossed ground; the greyhound, who followed all the way obediently behind her, came and lay at her feet.

Across the floor of moss stood a young beech with small leaves of a piercing green. Sabia soon noticed that one hanging branch swayed and rocked continually, and as she watched she saw a reddish breast and the flutter of a white feather in a wing.

She sat still till the branch ceased its swinging for a moment; then she stole towards it. Soon she found that flat upon the fork of the bending bough two chaffinches had built their nest. It was a round, perfect house of love, so clever, coloured so softly, so feather-lined. Carefully Sabia laid the tip of one finger within; the nest was warm and as soft as down. Without more hesitation she took the ring from her bosom, kissed it once, slipped it in the nest; then, afraid of her own deed, she fled up through the woods, her heart beating, her breath panting on her lips. She had done a terrible thing—she had plucked her long-secret love out of her bosom to put it to the hazard of that rocking branch,

of those beating wings, of those wild and tiny hearts. If these should fail her now, what could her own heart do but break?

All that night Sabia tossed upon her bed, dreaming of birds' wings and feathers and the eyes of Estercel; wondering, when she woke, how her ring was faring away down in the dark among the wild creatures of the wood; grieving for fear the chaffinches should quarrel with the ring and desert the new-built nest.

Although she was now a grown maiden, she still took her morning meal with her nurse in the upper room; while her grave father sat with his friends round the table in the hall, she was off and away to her parlour of pure green hidden in the wood. When she was come to the tree and the nest, there, lo and behold! a small egg lay right within the circle of the ring. Sabia held her breath for pleasure, so unexpected it looked, so pure in its pale colour, so delightful in its shape; it seemed to her as great a wonder as any star.

Thereafter Sabia came each day to the wood. The chaffinches were wild and shy, but as she stepped softly, and seldom came quite near, they soon became used to seeing the silent creature seated over against them in her plumage of green or brown, with her grey companion sleeping at her feet.

As there was little to do as she sat, Sabia kept her prayers to say in her new chamber in the wood; she told her rosary over as she sat among the leaves, and each day she added a prayer for Estercel.

Each day the roof of leaves grew deeper; the beeches flourished to a more amazing emerald, till the wood was lit by a quivering green light. When the sun shone and a breeze blew, Sabia watched the moving golden

circles of the light that fell through the leaves and spotted all the ground.

In the top branches of the beech-tree the cock chaffinch showed his red breast and sang his quick song; his silent mate sat below, obediently accomplishing the wonder of the nest.

Sabia sat always where she could see the smooth brown creature spread upon the nest, the bright eye that gazed so patiently abroad, the head that turned so silently, pleased with the song that sounded far above.

After a time came one morning, and when Sabia came to the nest, in place of the fair smooth eggs, lo! five ugly little naked souls with gaping mouths sat all together upon her ring.

Sabia went home vexed that day. "Their looks disgust me, Nurse Phaire," said she. "I never saw young birds so ugly. They have got no feathers on. Their mouths are as large as their bodies, and they all squeak together. I do not like them to be sitting on my ring. I had a mind to have it out again."

Nurse Phaire shook her head wisely upon the ignorant girl. "Mistress Sabia is proud this morning, and handsome," said she. "But I remember a Mistress Sabia that was given into my hands one morning, seventeen years ago, who was no handsomer nor wiser than these little birds. Ah, God knows the young are scornful, but an old woman like me knows what goes before and behind them and is never proud at all."

Sabia stood pouting and bending her brows on her old nurse.

The old woman could not bear to see her cross; she reached out her hand and pulled the young girl on to her knee. "There, there, child of my heart, sure I

never meant to vex you. Handsome you are and proud you may be, and have a good right; but not too proud to love the poor old woman that nursed you. There, there, child of my heart, the ring is doing finely; it will be holding the better love surely now, for the pity of love will be in it, and it will be strong against sorrow and sickness and age."

Sabia kissed her back again, and next day returned to the wood; as she watched the parent birds at their hard labours of devotion she learned the pity and the service of love. Her tears dropped down that morning as she thought on suffering and age and death, and pride left her heart.

Then with a better wisdom she began to think again of Estercel. Below her the lake shone. In waving lines along its face the edges of the ripples caught the light, till it seemed as though rows of diamond lamps were being lit, bright as the spirit in those eyes that had troubled her peace. If only, she was thinking, her nurse's charm taught Estercel to look kindly upon her, her feet and her hands should be his servants till the last hour of age should bring her death.

Day by day the feathers grew upon the young ones in the nest; day by day the red breast and the brown laboured ceaselessly from dawn till dark to keep them satisfied. And in the labour seemed to be their pleasure, too, for the song from the beech-tree, though less frequent, was as loud as ever.

At length came a morning when the first young bird, full-feathered, very round and fat, most pretty now to Sabia's eyes, sat on the edge of the nest. Many times the short wings quivered and lifted, like living creatures that themselves desired the air, only to be folded once

more. At length with a mighty effort they rose again, and father and mother shrieked for joy as the first young bird fluttered over the edge of the nest and tumbled on to the moss below.

Another followed, and another, till only one was left in the nest. Then Sabia rose up and went over, for she feared lest her ring should be left cold. One young bird she lifted up, so round and sweet and short-tailed that she must needs kiss his downy feathers before she drew out her ring. It was quite warm and shining bright. Her fingers thrilled as she held it; her heart beat as she hid the charmed gold in her bosom.

For a moment longer she lingered to gaze at the wonder of the unsoiled nest, that had been the house of such delight, and that so soon now would be left cold.

But, once she turned, it was very fast she ran up through the wood to carry her treasure to her wise nurse, who awaited her.

As Sabia ran up the castle slope she began to be troubled. "Oh, nurse," she cried, as she gained the upper room, "what are we going to do? I have taken the ring back again; it is quite warm; but how in the world will we get my cousin Estercel to put it on his finger? I wonder I never thought of that till now."

"Where have you got the ring, my lamb?" asked the nurse, and Sabia gave it to her.

The old woman closed her eyes and held it tight in the palm of her hand. "It is indeed quite warm," she said, presently. "God bless the little birds for as innocent as they are. But see here now; I have a chain for you, Mistress Sabia, that I found in the box."

And as she spoke she strung the ring upon a light-linked chain and fastened it round Sabia's neck.

"There, my lamb," she said. "Keep it close and wear it night and day. The bird's charm is in it safe enough."

But the girl's mind had returned to its care. "But, nurse," she said, "what about my cousin Estercel? The ring may hang round my neck for a twelvemonth, for all the boldness or power I have to get it on to his finger."

"Leave it to me, my jewel," said the old nurse, "leave it to me. Have patience and I will find a way."

All the summer through Sabia waited, and she had the more patience because she felt always the secret of the ring next her heart; and because she believed in it and in the wonder that would come of it, maidenlike she had begun to fear. She was content to put off her happy days, and keep before her this promise of wonder that glorified all her future, like a rainbow that crosses a spring sky.

Sabia had the more leisure for her dreams, since serious matters occupied the attention of her father and of those gentlemen who were his friends.

The north under Tyrone was daring once more to lift up its head and stare across at the great Elizabeth who sat angry on her throne, composing splendid sentences of vituperation which she hurled cross the sea. Robert Cecil was secretly casting his nets, a wide throw. The whole country was full of those uneasy rumours of threatening wars that send men riding and speaking much secretly together. Therefore Sabia, who was accounted by her father as still a child, and who, moreover, had no sister nor near kinswoman, was left much alone.

So it passed till, with the mists of October, Tyrone went hunting the stag. At the dawn Sabia's father

rode away, and Sabia beside him to keep him company for the first miles of the way; then she must needs turn her horse's head and ride home again, for the hunt was too far and too fast for her, and, moreover, there were to be other matters on foot besides the stag.

Towards dusk the young girl stood by one of the hall windows watching the narrow road that wound down from the castle gate. The October mists were rising and cloaking the colours of the autumn trees; for an hour and more she stood dreaming and listening to the robins' song that came up from below. At last, with the deepening of the evening, colour and song together faded away and the silence was for a while complete.

Then with a start she lifted up her head, for she heard the sound of jaded, stumbling hoofs; and surely it was the sound of more men than rode out behind her father in the morning. While she listened, out of the dusk appeared figures, two horsemen that rode the winding white track and seemingly talked together, and one bigger than the others who rode a white horse a little way behind, and at the back of him again two serving-men. As they reached the foot of the steep castle slope she could hear the breathing of the sorely blown horses. Then she saw that the tallest of the horsemen dismounted and himself began to lead his horse up to the castle, speaking kindly to him as he did so.

Sabia saw that it was Estercel. Like an arrow she flew from the hall and up the stairway to her chamber above, for the ring seemed to burn her bosom.

From her chamber she heard a tramping and a shouting and a running to and fro of serving men and women, and all the noise and open-air clamour that the return of gentlemen at the close of a day brings to a silent house.

An hour and more passed and no one had been to seek Sabia, and she felt herself forgotten. The tears were standing in her eyes, when suddenly the door was pushed open and Nurse Phaire came in. The old woman saw the figure of Sabia against the dusky window where she waited.

"Mistress Sabia! Mistress Sabia! the master has been calling for you! What have you been doing not to come down? There was I must find the linen and put those lazy girls to set two chambers ready for the gentlemen with him, for their horses are over-ridden and they can go no farther to-night. Ah, but if you had known who was here with his Honour, you would have run down fast enough, I promise you. But come now, my lamb; I have a sight for you to see."

She took the reluctant girl by the hand and pulled her from the window and out into the dark passage, where a lighted candle stood. Without allowing her time to pause, the nurse hurried her along till they came to a narrow passage where one could hardly pass, at the end of which was a tiny flight of steps and a narrow door. This the nurse opened with a key, and in another moment the two stood in a narrow dark gallery that ran along the north end of the hall. Laying her hand upon Sabia's mouth, the old woman drew her silently forward into the centre of the gallery.

Below in the hall a huge fire of logs was burning on the flat hearthstone, and the flames with a galloping sound were rushing up the great black chimney.

The dark hall was full of their light; they and the quivering radiances that streamed from them seemed to rejoice in the hall as if in a playground they themselves had chosen; they leaped and fought and played with

a gaiety more brilliant than is shown by any other children of the summer sun.

Sideways, over against the fire, was a black oaken seat heaped with skins and furs. Upon them, carelessly stretched, lay a man in his first youth, sleeping sound. His whole attitude expressed the healthful weariness of the day's hunting and the pleasure of rest. He was dressed in a suit of light homespun cloth. The strong curling locks of hair upon his head and neck had the colour of the flame-light; but for all this grace of youth, his face was that of a man, and his limbs, so negligently thrown down to sleep, appeared lengthy and strong.

"Mistress Sabia," whispered the nurse, "see how he's sleeping—for all the world like an innocent child. Thank your nurse, my lamb, for she had him washed and dressed and got him down before the rest of them. Take up your gown now, child of my heart, and run down as quick as the wind, and as quiet, and clap the ring upon him while he's sleeping. Holy saints, bless the boy; he's tired out."

"Oh, I cannot, nurse; I am afraid. If he wakened and caught me, I should be lost," whispered Sabia, in great fear.

"Give me the ring, then, silly child," said the old woman, crossly. "You can go quick and I go slow, and some one may be coming into the hall. Stay there, then, and watch, if you are afraid." Grumbling under her breath, the old woman hobbled along to the gallery door.

Sabia waited a moment, gazing down upon the young man's heavy sleep, while she wrung her hands together in distress. To her nurse, her cousin Estercel was but a splendid child; to her he was the burning spirit of life

itself, at once terrible and beautiful, offering her sharp arrows and an enchanted cup.

She could hear that her nurse was near the bottom of the winding stone stair; she could not bear to see her approach the youth with the ring. As though her feet were winged, she fled back through the dark passages to her own chamber and cast herself in an agony of shame upon the floor.

"Oh, I am a very bold girl," she cried to herself. "How could I think to do such a thing? If he finds it out, he will despise me for ever, and then I shall die in earnest."

Presently in came her nurse, laughing, and carrying two wax lights with her. "Get up, get up, Mistress Sabia," she cried. "What is it you're doing lying there on the floor? and nothing but the best of good fortune in store for you now from this out. The ring is on his finger and he's fast yet. He never stirred no more than the wolf that owned the skin that's under him. Quick now, child, come and let me dress you; his Honour has sent word you are to come to the table to-night, and I have got some things out of the box for you. What's that? The tears running down out of your eyes? Stop that nonsense directly, Mistress Sabia. Come and kiss your old nurse, my pretty lamb—your old nurse that loves you—and let me dress you and make you as handsome as the heavenly stars."

According to long use and wont, the nurse took hold of her charge, undressed and bathed her, combed her thick curls while Sabia fretted; put on her an under-dress of white homespun wool, and over it a garment of white silk, the piece of which had been brought over from France but five years before.

If Sabia had any pleasure in the toilet, her nurse had

twenty times as much. Words cannot tell the delight of the nurse's heart in her young nursling that grows into beauty under her care as the tree blossoms under the gardener's hand. Sabia had grown tall enough now to reach for the fruit that grows on the boughs of the tree of life; her lips were ready for tasting it; and the old nurse felt that she could lie down in peace, once she saw her darling satisfied.

But Sabia herself knew care and dread. How could she bear to see the open sign of her long-cherished secret, under the eyes of all, upon a careless hand?

When at length she was fully dressed she stood before the brazen mirror, and the old woman bound round her head the narrow golden band with the white beryl-stone in the centre, that shed a pale lustre upon her forehead. Sabia looked in the mirror, that gave back an uncertain reflection like one seen in water. But she took no pleasure in what she saw, neither in her eyes, which were like a dark night of stars with a round white moon riding above, nor in her gown of silk, nor her thick locks. She only thought, "Oh, if I had but hair the colour of the sunlight and eyes like Estercel's, he would not turn away from me."

But as she thought it a knock came to her door, and a voice in the passage to say that supper was served in the hall.

Sabia had no courage to set out by herself; her face was pale, and her nurse had to take her by the hand and lead her down to the door of the hall, as she had been long ago used to do. But when no escape was possible and she must needs go in through the lit arch of the doorway, she cast away her fears and entered like a true daughter of her father's house.

The nurse, for as long as she could see in her corner by the door, watched her crossing the lower end of the hall in her streaming white garments, with her head well uplifted. As soon as the doorway's edge had hidden her, the old woman turned, and smiling to herself, hobbled back to the upper chamber. Then sitting down to rest in the chair, she fell fast asleep, for she was very old, and Sabia's father, too, had been a babe in her arms.

Some hours later she was suddenly awakened, and there was Sabia waiting at her knees, in a young ecstasy, her face like a dark rose for its wreath of smiles.

"Oh, nurse," she cried, clasping her hands together, "it is true, indeed it is, the charm of the ring. When I was got in the hall and had given my father good-night, Estercel he came straight across to me; and he said, 'Will you sit by me at supper, Cousin Sabia?' And I was so glad. And all through the supper he talked to me and told me of the day's hunting and many matters besides. And now when my father desired me to leave them, he bade me good-night most kindly, saying, 'Shall we meet again, Cousin Sabia?' And I am so glad. And many times he looked down at the ring upon his hand, and I could see he was thinking of it; and he asked me if I believed in the fairies, and whether I had seen them, and if there was any hurt in fairy gold. And, oh, nurse, charm or no, I feel now I should never have done it, for I cannot bear to deceive."

"Tut, tut, and nonsense!" said the old nurse, crossly, for she hated to be awakened from her sleep. "Where's the deceiving? Get up from there, Mistress Sabia, and take off your silk dress, and get into your bed. I'm perished sitting here."

CHAPTER III

FLUMMERY AND CREAM

FAIR mild weather was come in March. Snows and rough winds might be waiting but a week away; what matter since now the sun shone and light breeze sailed by the hills as though it were summer.

On the hill-slope below Ardhoroe Castle young Sabia sat sewing very finely at her embroidery; Queen Elizabeth sewing with her ladies that very minute in London town could not sew finer than she; for she had been over the sea to be lessoned in France, and that was more than Queen Elizabeth had ever been allowed to do.

Sabia was dressed in a brown gown, sober and neat. As she sat like a quiet brown bird on the hill, you might not have cared to look at her twice; but if you had looked twice, you would have looked a third time and then perhaps again: for the finger of mystery that smooths the velvet coat of the field mouse, and paints each feather of the lark, had touched and moulded her small face into beauty and curled the spirals of her dark hair; and the breath of mystery that swells the bosom of the lark as she darts singing towards the heavens, breathed also in the young girl's soul.

From time to time she would hold her work aside and turn her head to look upon a pleasant sight.

On the short grass of a little hollow near the bottom of the hill, which the sunshine filled as though it were a

cup, lay an enormous and truly splendid young man. Beside him couched like a hound a white stallion of great size and strength. The head of the stallion was stretched out towards the young man, whose hand played with the rippled locks on his forehead and neck.

From the woods around the castle hill rose up the songs of birds, and from the castle itself came the noise of the screaming of old women, while strange objects flew from the open door.

"Hark to them now!" said the young man. "They are doing great execution there above."

Sabia bent her sad eyes down the hill and sidled along the grass a little way.

"And not on the hall alone, Estercel," said she, "but on the whole place inside and out. It is no life for me, this three days past. There are fifteen of them and all grandmothers; oh, they are happy together! Not a mouse, nor a spider, nor an earwig will be left in the castle by nightfall. Moreover, scarcely one of them has a tooth left, so I get nothing for my food but flummery and cream."

"Flummery and cream is very good food," said Estercel. "Do you suppose there is any of it now in the house?"

"That I will soon discover," answered the girl; and lifting up her voice she called on a high clear note:

"Phaire, Nurse Phaire!"

A shrill scream answered her and the bent old woman with a coloured head-wrap appeared at the door and hobbled down the slope.

"Is it wanting me you are, my brown dove?" said she. "Ah, ha, and so they are come, the two beauties of the world!" and tottering down a few steps further

she fell to contemplating the young man and his horse with rapture.

"Estercel is hungry, Nurse Phaire," said Sabia. "Is there anything to eat above at the house?"

"Is there anything to eat at Ardhoroe Castle and the O'Neil himself coming here the morrow's morn? Anything to eat? Great are the preparations. Are there not twelve three-year-old bullocks that have breathed their last, and as many sheep, and one hundred quarters of wheat, and as much oaten meal, and the full of a barrack of honey?"

"Half a sheep and four pounds of good oaten bread will suffice," said Estercel, his eyes shut as he lay in the sun.

"As you wish, my lamb," the old woman said turning to climb the hill. Then clearing her throat, she stopped. "That will be for the evening's meal, heart's jewel," she said. "It is not all in a minute that a sheep can be cooked; but if the hunger is on you, I would counsel you to take something at once to stay your stomach. There is some beautiful flummery jelly above, made of the oaten seeds from Carne mill, well steeped, and rich cream. Better could not be had between here and Dublin. And, Sabia, my jewel, the honey is come. Two dishes shall be brought you here on the hill, and you will take your food here in the sun. (Mary the Virgin be praised for the weather!)"

"I thank you, nurse," said Estercel, while Sabia looked joyfully up at the mention of the honey, her tears gone for the moment. "I will be grateful also for a dish of oats for Tamburlaine. He that carries me eats first."

"Good, good," said the nurse; "you shall be served."

And the horse who understood his master's language lifted up his head and whinnied after her.

Sabia, her mouth full of honey and her eyes upon Estercel, forgot for a while the trouble of her heart. But no sooner had she finished eating than sharp sorrow ran like a pain through her bosom, and she uttered a long and bitter sigh.

"What is the matter, my cousin?" said Estercel, looking at her and perceiving that the water was standing in her eyes.

"What is the matter?" said Sabia, in a grievous voice. "Terrible war is the matter, and my broken heart, and that you will be going away from Ardhroe at the bidding of Tyrone to-morrow."

"And how do you know that?" said Estercel, putting down the horn spoon with which he had been eating the oaten jelly; in a moment his face was changed: all the laziness gone; white fire started in the blue eyes and the tall neck was erected on its broad base.

"Last night my father told it me," said Sabia, "that it might so happen that Tyrone would send you as an emissary to Dublin."

Estercel leaped to his feet. "What?" said he. "Tyrone take and send me! The O'Neil! Oh, this is too much joy!"

Sabia looked at the fighting face of him and the ecstasy; she turned pale as death, threw her arms up above her head, then flung herself face downward on the hill-side uttering a low and bitter wail.

Estercel was astonished; he was kind at heart and soon he felt pity. "Dear, dear, dear, what is the matter?" said he, and he went softly and picked her up, sorry at the sight of her pale face, all bathed in tears, and

the brown curls dabbled. Like a father he took her on his knee and soothed her with his great hand. But she turned cold, and trembled, and drew away from him. Then she looked up into his face with her brown wet eyes.

"I have tried to bear it and I cannot, Estercel," said she. "Listen now. I am alone in life. My father is not loving me very much; he is too busy with his fighting. I have neither mother nor sister nor brother. Is an old nurse of seventy and a couple of aunts sufficient consolation for a young maiden? Since ever I could walk, you have been all that I care for. Tamburlaine himself does not love you better than I, and, oh, woe is me, your horse is your dearest."

"That is not so," said Estercel, with much gravity. "There is no one in the world I love as much as you but Tyrone himself. First him, then you, and then Tamburlaine," and as he said the words a white nose came over his shoulder and the girl was softly pushed aside.

At that they both laughed; and Sabia stood up on her feet; Estercel rose also and the jealous horse came and laid his head fondly down on his shoulder while he talked.

"Wait now till I tell you," said the young man. "I am often thinking about you. I see how you are placed. I would protect you if I could. Willingly I would take you for a wife to me one day, were it not for one circumstance."

"And what may that be?" asked Sabia.

"I do believe," said Estercel, dropping his voice and glancing around, "that I am beloved of a fairy woman. One day of last October I was sleeping out and this

ring was put on my finger and I asleep. Now who could have done that but one of the good people? And moreover, I believe the ring is bewitched, for I do assure you I am not the same man since. I often start from my sleep and have strange dreams, whereas before that day evening was morning before I knew, and as it were at a clap. Therefore, if I were to enter into any compact with you, I should fear the anger of the apparition."

Sabia's face became fiery red. "You are mistaken," she said boldly. "It was not sleeping out you were, but in my father's hall; nor was it one of the good people that put that ring on your finger, but my nurse did it. And you say truly that it is not as other rings, for there is a charm in it."

A look of blank astonishment and then of angry disappointment crossed the young man's face.

"Your nurse put it upon my finger?" he said at last. "What at all possessed her to do such a thing?—and what charm is in the ring?"

But Sabia could not answer; she turned away twisting her hands.

"Answer me," said he. "What charm has she put on me, for I will know?"

For all answer, Sabia burst into tears.

With an angry gesture Estercel plucked off the ring and flung it at her feet; then stalked away, followed by his horse.

Sabia sprang up and seized the ring. "Oh, it is still warm, my thanks to the saints!" she cried, and clasping the ring tight in her two hands she took again her place on the hill-side.

She had been sad before; she was ten times as sad now. She thought of her convent at Rouen, the stone

walls, the stone-paved streets, the high houses, the ordered life that had seemed to her stone bound. Almost she wished herself there again, so loveless was her life among these men of war. To them a sword was more than love; a battle-axe a finer thing than friendship. Or so, in her present mood, it seemed to her.

Whether she looked to the north, where Slieve Gallion, forty miles round, with his sheer precipices, bogs, and quagmires stretched himself in the sun; or southward across the forest to the blue hills that safeguarded the north; or heavenward where the larks spun and chanted, it seemed a cold and weary land, and she took no joy in it.

She opened her hand and gazed upon the ring; on the seven bands plaited together, coiled four times about, ending in a bird's head curiously worked, with a curved bill and an eye of green enamel.

"It is a wise-looking bird," she said aloud. "And the charm is in it yet. Could I but get it on to his finger once more!"

CHAPTER IV

ARDHOROE'S WELCOME

THE broad lands of the North were scarce awake the next morning when the O'Neil, Earl of Tyrone, came riding to Ardhoroe. As the sun rose above the earth's rim, the shadows of men riding four by four appeared black against the grey, coming out of western Donegal. Hardly had the first white beams enlivened the green of the slopes about the castle before Tyrone's runner was come, the silver axe on his shoulder and the breath well nigh out of his body.

That was the way of Tyrone; up early and late; riding, fighting, training up his men. A thousand at a time he kept at his back, and when they were well fashioned into stout soldiery he disbanded them and took other thousand; and this for years past he had been doing, so that by now few indeed were the men of the North that had not been under his hand.

All night Ardhoroe had been awake; long before the dawn Estercel had gone out to meet Tyrone on his white horse that loved the dark better than the day. All night there had been baking of cakes of bread and roasting of mighty joints; for the hospitable breakfasting of a thousand is no light matter.

Sabia, in her good green gown with well-snooded hair, was waiting on the tower-top to watch the riders come in. Winding like a dark serpent among the brown woods they came; now seen, now half seen, now wholly hidden.

Far away as yet, the music of the war-pipes and the rumour of the hoof-beaten earth came to the tower-top; all living things within the circle of the dawning light, ay, even rocks and stones, awoke to the thrillingsound. Cattle lowed, every lark darted to the sky; the blackbird chose the highest thorn; the sheep and the young lambs cried to each other: was not the master of the North, the bulwark against destruction, on his road to O'Neil's tower? Sabia waited on, a still shape in cold morning air, till in the brightening light she could make out the figures of the three leaders that rode in front; not far behind was the white speck that told her Estercel was there.

From below came the noise of the shouting of servants and retainers; the barn under the castle hill had been cleared, and sledges loaded with provisions were run down from the kitchens to supply the long tables that were set ready for the men below.

Taking her gown in her hand, she descended the tower stairs. The dark square stone hall had been hung with hand-woven cloth, dyed by the women to the colour of the foxglove, and round the walls were hung the ancient shields of the O'Neils. The table of black oak, hacked and scored, that twenty men could scarce lift, was polished and set with platter and bowl and shining silver cups; one wrought tankard of gold that stood for Tyrone at the high seat at the table end.

A well-built-up fire of logs flamed on the hearthstone that was eight feet long by five feet broad and two feet thick. The logs were skilfully laid on a broad base below rising to a point; the darting flames drew from right and left to the centre and sprang gorgeously up against the smoke-blackened wall; they lit the whole hall, not

with the still quiet light of a wax torch, but with a leaping light that was alive and full of the noise of life, a right welcome for a warrior.

But there was nothing of the heroic spirit in the girl that leaned by the door-post awaiting the coming of the troop. Many and many a princess and queen of men had come of her house, women heroic and firm-eyed, who had not scrupled in the old days to lead their men into battle when the need arose. But Sabia was as tender as the she-dove; fear and pity were her portion in time of war. A longing for the sweetness of love filled her heart and mind. Her face was pale and still under the leaping light of the fire, and despair of love unnerved the hands that hung down along her dress. Her heart gave no welcome to the leader whose bonnet and feather even now emerged from the dark wood paths: with her two hands she could have pushed him from the door.

The ill moment comes even while we watch; soon the shouting of the captains filled the air; the men turned out of the ranks at the foot of the hill; the tramp of the horses, tired though they were, thrilled in the stones of the wall.

Winding up the hill-slope on foot came the little company of gentlemen, some twenty in all; at their head the big brown-bearded man in cloak and bonnet, on whom the eyes of Europe were fixed; was he not going to dare the lioness Elizabeth who balanced all the reigning powers with her two hands? As Sabia stood cold in the doorway, with a rush and a scream the women of the house went by her, and the men after them; down in the dust they threw themselves, kissing the feet of Tyrone and the borders of his cloak; not one dared to

lift lip or eye even as high as the fingers of his hand. For a moment he stood and smiled as he listened to the cries of blessing that invoked the light of God about him while he walked the world, and heaven for his bed when this life was done. And then to see the women when he moved on! To see them down upon their knees scraping up the precious handful of dust on which his foot had trod! Not one of them would turn to her work till she had tied up in safety this treasure which each of them would carry to her grave.

And all the while Sabia stood silent by the door.

CHAPTER V

TYRONE'S COUNCIL

LIKE a magnet the person of Tyrone drew to him a concourse from all quarters of the compass wherever he might be. If you had stood upon the castle-top all that morning, you might have seen dark specks come creeping up from the sky's circle, friends, and messengers, Scotch, Spanish, and French, returning emissaries; all converging upon one point, the Tower of Ardhoroe. Riding, running, marching, hobbling they came. Old blind women, of keen many-wrinkled countenance; yet of so much poverty and simplicity of aspect that none might take them for political agents. More than this, if you had the wing of a strong bird, and could have risen high in air above the tower, you would have seen more than one runner by wood and hill path coming from the south-west: further yet, on the rocky headlands of Louth, you might have seen the watchers standing; further yet and there were the sails of Tyrone's fast skiffs upon the sea, one signalling the other, coursing like greyhounds upon the waves, all to carry news to the leader of the coming of Essex and the English fleet.

He, the centre of it all, sat at the high table in the hall of Ardhoroe. Behind Tyrone stood his squires, each one in turn serving him on the knee. Sabia leaned by the side of her father's chair and waited upon him. Loud was the talking, jesting, and laughing. Men-

servants and women-servants hurried up and down the hall. The dogs sat back silent, looking on, watching the beloved faces of their masters, and waiting their turn to be fed. Tyrone talked but little; now and again he said a word to the short dark man beside him that was Sabia's father, then leaned again back in his chair, glancing from face to face as a man reads line after line of a printed page.

That eye of his, the leader's eye! As the burning sun is the central point of the heavens round which the stars move obediently, so did that eye of Tyrone's command the eyes of these men that followed him.

When the meal was over the board was cleared. Sabia and the squires withdrew, all save Estercel, who was bidden to stand as guard but out of earshot. The rabble of men and women servants, onlookers and dogs, departed. As the last sound of hurrying and scuffling feet had died away the chiefs assembled round the table in council; among them Tyrone's state was plainly that of a king.

Figure to yourselves that massive form and powerful bearded head against the tall chair's back, one hand clenched upon the knee, the other, clenched too, resting on the chair-arm; the broad forehead frowning while the wide and weighty thoughts ranked themselves within.

Dead silence reigned as the flames rose and sank; round the table were the members of his council; nearest him the two Hughs, his two fighting lieutenants; Red Hugh O'Donnell, famous in history, and Hugh Maguire. The picked men of Ireland these were—and it was great to see them there, leather-coated, steel-jacketed, hardy and keen-faced men. In deep silence Tyrone sat on; almost you could see the procession of

his thoughts moving behind his brow. At last he opened his mouth and began to speak.

"Friends of my heart," said he, "I have great matters to lay before you. Trust me—before much time is gone the world will be astonished, and with good cause."

He motioned to his secretary, who placed a heavy leather pouch on the table beside him; out of it he drew some papers and opened them out on the table before him.

"Gentlemen," says he, "this war is not what it seems. They that watch affairs know well that a great matter wears two faces: one is the outer mask that the world sees; the other, the inner and true face, that is most often of another complexion. In the face of the world there are but two in the fight, Essex and myself, who am Ireland. In very deed there are three and the third is the hunchback, Robert Cecil. And he fights not with me but with Essex. To destroy the earl they have sent him hither.

"Now mark well what I say: although in the open day Essex and I are enemies, as secret allies we may overthrow the world."

"I like not that word 'allies,'" said old Magnus Joy. "There is no possible alliance between us and the Saxon but the alliance of the sword's with the quick flesh."

"Nay, Magnus, policy is more than the sword point. I think not in those terms of my Lord of Essex. As you know, I was many years his companion in South Wales at my Lord of Leicester's Castle of Lamphey. Many and many a time has he wept on my neck, knowing not how to contain his heart within him that burst with hatred of the Lord of Leicester, for that he had murdered his father by poison and taken his false mother to wife. Ay, and he loathed the presence of his mother, knowing

not truly whose son he was; ay, and worse and many more matters behind, suspicion on suspicion of those plots between the queen and Leicester and the base Lady Essex, his mother, till the lad was like to destroy himself. Nay, I cannot forget; Essex is noble; the one man of all the court who held it a shame to deceive his enemy, to use craft and poison and treachery."

"It is in his blood, though," shouted old Magnus Joy; "it is in his blood. Did not his father slay by deceit and poison here in Ireland men and women and children? Think we shame to take foxes in traps? So they look upon us, curse them. There is not an Englishman of them all but is false as Judas when he kissed his master. Give me the sword and the spear and the arquebus, say I—and let us have no treaties with hell."

There was silence for a moment after Magnus had spoken. Long years of training in the house of Leicester, who was a king in power and policy, though not in name, had trained the O'Neil. His face was quiet and his brow smooth as he sat in silence thinking his own thoughts. Then he turned a kindly eye upon the old man.

"Always a noble fighter have you been, Magnus, my friend. To-morrow is your day, the day of war. To-day is mine, the day of fore-thinking and the plan of the battle. I am he that leads."

A murmur followed his words, the deep sound in the men's throats proclaiming their fast adherence to his decision.

At the same moment a rapping came on the door without, and a servant stood within and said: "Four messengers more to see the O'Neil."

"Let them come in," said O'Neil.

Through the open door filed a string of strange figures; first came a long, lean, exhausted youth, pale as death and reeling in his gait; after him came two, linked hand in hand, a white-bearded harper, blind, tall, and blanched, and an old woman featured like an eagle with black beady eyes, indescribably ragged. Last of all, a spurred rider with mud of ten differing tints upon him.

"A mug of wine to Owen there and set him in a chair till he gets breath," said Tyrone. There was silence till the man had drunk. "What news of the fleet, boy?" said he.

"I passed the day on the cliffs of the Head of Howth, and towards evening Neil Malone brought his pinnacle within shout of me. The good winds hold and the ships are beat back to where they came from. Along the shore the women are out on their bare knees in rows like the gulls of the sea, praying the good winds may blow hard and drown them all. They are saying their prayers are blowing them backwards. God grant they may send them to the bottom all out."

"Well, and if not we'll have the glory of beating them on Irish ground," said O'Neil. "Good news you have brought me, Owen, for each day of delay is a day of gain for us. You shall be rewarded. Go now and rest yourself. Now, Kieran, what of the camp?"

The old blind harper moved a couple of paces further into the hall and bowed towards the voice that he heard.

"From the camp, Lord?—ay, I come from the camp! Camp! Saving the honour due to your presence, it is not a camp, but a hog-pound. There was I, singing and harping to them; and now and again one of the afflicted ones would rise up and deliver me a kick, and so I would move round and round, one time listening to

the groans of the sick and the fighting and the sound of the lash; another time hearkening to the tales of the horse-boys. Lord, there is scarcely a sound man among them. Their clothes are ragged. They lie on the ground in the mud and the dirt. Their food is bad; barrels of stinking salt fish their chief repast. Their clothes and their pay and their food are stolen from them by the officers and there is no redress. Every day they die cursing and unregarded."

"Are the council making preparation for the armies of Essex?" said the chief.

"No, Lord: and many speak strangely of the council and their care of the camp. Any one would think they were breeding plagues there of set purpose."

"Hasn't he had his turn and more than enough of speaking?" said the old woman boldly pushing forward.

"Is my voice never to be heard?"

Tyrone laughed. "Come on, old Ronnat," said he, "ever the keenest of my messengers. How thrive the fine gentlemen of the Pale?"

"I'll soon tell you that, Lord," said the old woman; the strength and the range of her voice was marvellous; the leap of an octave was nothing to her, and up and down the length of two it ran.

"Did ever you see, any or all of you gentlemen, a man with one foot on a stone and one in a boat, and he humouring the boat on the water with his foot, ready for land or sea, ready to stay or go? That's the way they are, the men of the big houses; one eye and one hand for Essex on the seas; one eye and one hand for Hugh, King of Ireland. Many's the hearth I have sat beside and while I supped the cold meal coldly given, my ears wereopen to the talk. Far and wide have I travelled,

not a great house but I have been inside it; for I have a charm for the dogs, and your greatness knows that my tongue can wile the birds off the bushes."

"Take care, old Ronnat," said Hugh Maguire with a broad smile. "Take care of the sin of pride and vain-glory. The saints are ever humble."

The old woman instantly changed her manner to one of deep humility. "God knows, Hugh Maguire, I have nothing to be proud of. I'm not like yourself that can pull a man off a horse and skiver him to the ground as soon as look at him. What in life is there to be proud of more than the power of the fight and a skinful of big bones?"

A laugh went round the table, but Tyrone lifted a hand and all were silent.

Old Ronnat looked keenly at the face of Tyrone, and seeing its sternness changed her tone.

"What I'm after saying concerns only the big houses and the people of no pedigree arrived from God knows where at the back of beyond; the heart of the real people is yours everywhere, O'Neil. You can put out your hand and take it as I might gather a flower."

"I have a letter here that came yesterday from Sir John McCoghlan, a man that owes me a thousand benefits; did you call at his house, Ronnat?"

"Ay, did I," said the old woman with a chuckle. "He's one of the two-faced sort. I saw the messenger leave with the letter, a long yellow-faced lad with a brown coat and yellow belt. Was that the one? I thought he'd get here before me. And from the front door there went a man on horseback at the same minute with a broad letter for the council at Dublin."

"Ay, and is that so? I will deal with him straight.

Owen, an ink-horn and a pen," he called. With great rapidity he wrote for a minute, and then lifting the paper, "How like you this, my councillors?" said he, and read aloud:

"Hugh, Earl of Tyrone, to Sir John McCoghlan : We commend us to you. We have received your letter, whereby we understand you intend none other but use fair words, and by delays win time. For our part of the matter, who taketh no part with us to defend the right, we take that man to be against us. Wherefore deal for yourself, and for us the worst you may, and we accordingly use you to the uttermost of our power."

"Here, Owen," said Tyrone to his secretary, as the captains murmured applause, "let this be copied: and send letters in the same sense to these gentlemen also," and he scribbled down a list on a sheet of paper. "Thank God we can do without half-friends. We are not so poor in hearts. Now, Donal, your message."

The muddled rider came forward and handed on his knee a parchment roll tied with a silk cord and a hanging seal. Tyrone cut the cord and read. Then raising his head he struck his clenched fist upon the table.

"My God, gentlemen, they have thrown the last honest man, the last friend Essex had, out of the council. Let him name who he will, Cecil will throw him out. Two of them only have sworn in faith to me; the rest are Cecil's. Gentlemen, when two dogs are fighting, it were odd if the third dog did not come by the bone."

He laid his broad hand across his brow and thought, then leaned forward, his eyes flashing blue light while his councillors caught fire from his excitement.

"By God, I see the plot. The queen and the common folk of England are lovers of Essex; therefore Cecil,

who is James of Scotland's man, is bound to destroy him. And here in this country he will strip him of honour and of life if he can. Therefore, we must make ourselves strong; ay, ten times stronger than before. All Ireland shall come in to our banner. When the hand of Cecil is at Essex's throat we will lay bare the plot to him; Essex has the whole power of England at his back. One mighty push and he leaps to the throne. What is the goggle-eyed, knock-kneed fool that is son of Mary Stuart to Elizabeth and the people of England? And once Essex is on the English throne, we are his allies, slaves no longer: Ireland is free!"

With a shout the men rose to their feet, their strong countenances lit by passion turned all to the leader.

"Who now will go for me and take my message to Essex, ay, speak with him face to face, in the midst of the enemy?"

"We are known, O'Neil," said the captains, looking at each other and doubtfully shaking their heads. "We should be taken in an hour. Not one of us but is marked."

Sabia's father made a motion of the hand in direction of a half lit recess where the figure of Estercel, who waited out of earshot, was leaning against the rough stone of the wall; a goodly and noble presence, though but a youth.

"All the thews and the muscles are there, I see," said Tyrone with a smile. "And an evident valour? But how about his wits? He seems to me but a simple youth."

"His simplicity is great," said Magnus Joy, "but he is no fool for all that. I have never known him lay a thing down that ever he planned to do."

The eyes of Estercel turned to Tyrone; he felt, though

he could not hear, that this moment was to decide his fate. A deep pallor overspread his face and the eyes in his head turned black, while the light swirled in them and then shot forth. That look was seen by Tyrone, who never failed in his judgment of men.

“Right,” said he, “he goes. I will devise a plan by which he may have speech of Essex and deliver my message. Now, my captains, the times and the fates are propitious: the ends of the salmon net are in our hands: one mighty pull and the water is swept clear. Look, now, the word is ride and ride; from north to south, they must come in, they shall come in: all Ireland shall stand under one banner and free. If it were to be only for a day, that day would be worth a lifetime, worth our lives. To our marching orders then: and as quickly as may be.”

CHAPTER VI

AS IRON SHARPENETH IRON

Two hours after the council broke. Cups of mead were served and cakes of bread, and the mounted made ready to ride away. As the chief was leaving the hall his eye fell again on the young maiden whose cold and unfriendly looks had been more than once noticed by him.

He took her by the hand, and waving aside those that followed him, he led her within the embrasure of the narrow window. The raw stone was left and right of them, cold to the touch. Before and below them the deep purple woods that shone in the sun and shook in the wind. In their ears was the rumour of noise of men and horses.

"Noble girl," said O'Neil, "what is the matter with you that you are angry with me? Why have you been darting fire at me out of your two eyes?"

"I wonder that you would take notice, Lord," said Sabia. "What should ail me to be angry with so great a man as you?"

"I leave no half-quenched coals behind me when I march," said Tyrone. "Yours is the only enemy's face in this house. And why is it so?"

Sabia turned whiter still and trembled where she stood. "What matter is it of a girl?" she said. "What matter if all goes from me and I am left alone? What matter if my life goes from me? With your

ridings and your fightings, your horses and your feathered bonnets, what care should you all take of one girl? "

Tyrone's dark blue eyes looked down upon the troubled countenance of the young girl. For one moment in his secret heart he laughed—it was to him just as though a hen partridge had flown in his face. Then, because he was a true leader, he who counts and weighs the small with the great, he bent his mind to consider seriously the creature that stood before him. His keen insight discerned in her the presence of that extraordinary thing, an overmastering passion; the strange possession that moves the mother, ay, and stirs sometimes in the father's heart; that shakes the lover till he trembles like a woman; that, turned to grief, gnaws and devours like fire in the breast, making death seem sweeter than life. Those who have once stood helpless in that stress recognise the marks in another. Tyrone looked on the girl and felt for her.

"Noble girl," said he, "grieve, if grieve you must, but do not be angry. It is true I seem to be taking away your father and your cousin; but, look now, am I my own master? I tell you I myself am driven by whips and God knows to what fate. And what care I so I can save my country from ruin? If you could see what I have seen, see the horsemen riding down upon women and children, see them driving their swords among them, see them hanging the young women upon trees with many a torture, see them burning the bright homes and firing the thatches, you would not grudge a man's arm to the war."

Sabia's eyes hung upon the leader's countenance; the bitter look died away. Pale she was, but no longer angry.

"How sore a thing it is to live!" she uttered, breathing the words so that they could scarcely be heard.

"No," said Tyrone, "it is a great thing, if your heart is strong. When I lived at the English court, how I languished! Now every day goes like the sound of a trumpet and as brief. Pluck up your heart, girl! There is much you can do. Heed me well now," and while speaking, he lifted Sabia's hand and looked at its small fingers, "when I was wounded in the leg and came near to losing my life, it was a woman's hand that saved me. Is there no one that can teach you the art of healing? Ere long every woman of Ireland may have a man's wounds to staunch."

"Your notion is a good one. There is something in it," answered Sabia steadily. "What you advise, that I will do. And I thank you, Lord, for speaking words of sense to me and not empty follies, that only sicken a wounded heart."

Tyrone's eye brightened. "Well spoken, girl," said he. "There is some comfort in dealing with your sort. Good-bye now, and heed what I say. You are small but you are keen. Ride abroad and with your eyes open. Keep this hill free of spies, a safe retreat in case of danger. And now, good-bye to you, noble daughter of Ardhoroe."

He stooped and left a brother's kiss upon her forehead and in a moment was gone through the door. Outside waited his captains; below at the foot of the hill stood the men. At equal distances on the downhill path were ranged the pipers, fine fellows and tall, their heads set on their necks like pine-crowns upon the stem.

As O'Neil came down, his captains about him, the

fearful throbbing scream of the war-pipes announced his coming. Ah, that war-march of the O'Neils!—how it tore the heart! Every passion and terror was in the sound; only nine notes on the chanter of the war-pipes, yet the voice of it climbed the heavens and struck down to hell below; exultation was in it and wild joy, the passion of the patriot, the demon rage of slaughter. “The red devil gripping you by the throat,” said a foreign soldier of it once.

As O'Neill passed by, the pipers, two by two, turned in after, as gallant in their going as stags, in spite of the great breaths they drew. And as the sound was increased by each couple that joined in at the back of O'Neil, Sabia fled to her chamber covering her ears with her two hands from the scream of it. It was no sound for the lover of peace.

CHAPTER VII

BY THE SALMON RIVER

EVERYWHERE and always the young have to suffer. Dead mothers may well stir in their graves and come up out of them to help. Living, how many a mother must weep.

Though the thorn of bitterness was gone from Sabia's heart, the wound remained. That night she could not sleep. She wandered in the moonlight round her chamber; then, unable to bear the weight of the roof above her head, she passed out into the cold blue night. For a while she walked the turf below the wall, then wandered down to the river and sat upon the little bridge, hearkening to the chiming of the waters upon the stones, the sliding waters that cast back the pale rays of the moon. The living silver salmon leaped in the moonlight. The joy of the fish seemed strange to her, whose heart was so heavy, half broken in her youth.

Now Estercel had not been able to sleep either; as for him, he was mad for joy. Chosen by his chief, and he to meet with the Lord Essex, his message to be delivered by word of mouth only: the morning, his good horse, the riding of the long road, the thanks of his leader, all the great adventure of life lay before him.

Still and however there was a bare and naked place on his finger, and a sore spot in his heart that worried him in a small degree. Therefore, when he saw a shadow straying down the Castle Hill, a tall wolf-hound close

behind, what did he do but follow also. It was a wholesomer cure for his hot fit of excitement than the woollen coverings of his bed.

The noise of the stream softened the sound of his footsteps. His shadow fell on the water and Sabia looked up.

Estercel sat down on the bridge by her side. Now there is something curious in the light of the moon: that cold blue radiance transfigures things from their daily semblance. If there were any land on which the light of the moon fell only and never that of the sun, what strange flowers, what strange souls might grow there. Whether it was the pale light, the sad passion of the girl's face, or the sense of the changing life that now was flowing so fast for him, Estercel began to have curious sensations, the like of which had never happened to him before.

"Sabia," said he, "tell me truly now, what charm was in the ring? (Oh, Mary Virgin, what a fish was that: eight pounds' weight at the least. Oh, that I had him at the end of a line.)"

Sabia looked coldly upon him. "Is it concerning the ring or the fish you would wish to converse with me, cousin?" she said.

"Do not be foolish, Sabia," said Estercel. "I asked you a plain question about the ring, which I would have you answer. As for the fish, there is not a man in Ireland that could behold such a fish unmoved. You were not used to quarrel with me in this manner."

"Indeed, Estercel, it is you that have quarrelled with me, and thrown the poor ring away in which there was no harm at all."

"But there was magic in it, that I know; for there

is a cold draught playing around my finger since I threw it away."

"Only a white charm, cousin, indeed. Could anything be more innocent than a little bird? Is there any harm in kindness? See now, I will tell you all, if you will promise not to despise me for my foolishness?"

"God forbid that I should despise the meanest of his creatures," said Estercel with solemn kindness.

Sabia's eyes flashed upon him for one moment: then seeing all his simplicity, she said, sweetly enough:

"Cousin, I will tell you truly of my great foolishness. I put the ring into a bird's nest in the spring-time, that by their affection a charm might be wrought in the gold. There I left it (in the fairest and best-made nest I could find) till the young were ready to fly and the charm had passed into the ring. Then I do confess that my old nurse put it on your finger, hoping to render you more kind and gentle. But, alas! it has been all in vain!"

"Never say so," said Estercel. "That is very harmless magic, and I grieve that I threw your ring away. Twice have I since been upon the spot to search for it, but no ring can I find."

"Is that so?" answered Sabia. "Well, and it is little wonder." She turned away her head to hide the tides of scarlet that were running up into her face. "For I picked the ring up before it was cold and the charm is in it yet. Will you have it, will you wear it, Estercel? Maybe it will shield you from all the terrible danger into which you must run."

"Willingly will I wear the ring," said Estercel, looking down into the face of the girl that was turned up to him. The unfamiliar radiance of the moon lit it strangely up; gleaming from amid the dark curls,

it appeared like the face of the fairy woman of his dreams. A thrill ran through his great frame; the maiden was new-created before him; from a far country she seemed to have come and her eyes held a new language with his soul.

Sabia had taken the ring from her bosom and now held it warm in her hand. "See," she said, "it has never got cold. Perhaps it will save and protect you. Estercel, in my dreams I know there is danger coming upon you. Avoid water; my dream is always of a round pool and some horrible creature that moves below the water, threatening to spring forth upon you. And you, you do not see it at all, and ever in my dream you are stooping to drink, and as soon as I cry upon you then I awake."

"It is natural for you to fear," he answered, "being only a woman, and a small one at that; and something weak in the spirit also. Now do not be vexed and make witch's eyes at me. I am but telling you that I, as a man, a man moreover of great size and strength (to God be the glory for that same), do not fear danger. Danger is it? I dote upon it! Ah, that day at the Yellow Ford when rage came upon me and I slew and slew! Fifteen stout soldiers fell under my hand!" He was going on when Sabia laid her hand upon his mouth.

"No more," she said, "no more! lest you bring down your fate upon you! So does the bull roar and tear up the ground, but when his hour comes, his strength is nothing. Give me your hand, Estercel, and I will put the ring back in its old place where it wishes to be; and night and morning I will pray to Mary with the seven wounds in her heart, who understands my sorrow, that her hand may be between you and harm."

Estercel was not very pleased to have his war-song interrupted, but so gentle was the touch of the girl's small hand, so piercing the sweetness of her countenance, that his vanity was soon forgot. Meekly and quietly he held out his hand, and the maiden placed the ring once more upon his finger. If you had seen him as he sat there you would have thought that a charm was indeed in the ring. He appeared to come out of himself as it were; as he gazed upon Sabia the light of reflection passed over his brow and a man's soul looked for the first time out of his eyes.

At the same moment sights and sounds played more vividly, more strangely upon his eye and ear. The wheeling moon and her spreading light, the baying of a dog that howled to it in the distance, the singing of the waters, and the mysterious passion of the girl who so clave to him together worked upon his spirit.

To-morrow he would be flung out on the broad world of which he knew such a little, these skies and hills would be moved backward into the past to stand there like a dream; and as his bold and intrepid spirit fled on before to meet the unknown, his heart, grown tender, turned back to familiar things and found a new meaning in them.

With wide open eye and nostril dilated, like a snuffing stag, he gazed around him, then turned, looked upon the girl, and with sudden passion caught her to his breast and kissed her face.

But Sabia, in fear and angry astonishment, reached up her hand and smartly slapped his cheek. She struggled free of him, slipping like an eel beneath his arm, sat down upon the wall again, and looked at him like a vexed thundercloud.

"Look now," said Estercel, astonished. "There is nothing amiss that ever I heard in a mere kiss! I meant it all in sweet affection as a most acceptable farewell! And behold you now! first you slap my face, and now you look at me as the hen looks at the shadow of the kite upon the ground!"

"You are talking!" said Sabia, panting with indignation. "It is very well to talk: but you had better be sorry immediately, or I will never converse with you again."

Estercel grinned, a broad and cheerful grin. "I am sorry, indeed," said he, but you could tell he was laughing within himself.

"You had better be sorry in your heart, Estercel. It is not fit that a young gentleman and gentlewoman of good birth should behave in so foolish a manner. Let there, by all means, be sweet affection and amity between us, but no such clownishness as that."

"Call you it clownishness? Indeed! And as for the behaviour of gentlemen, I have heard tell . . ."

"Be silent," said the girl. "It grows towards morning: see, the moon is dipping down and the breeze is more fresh. Say farewell now, Estercel. I know not how it is with me; is it possible to feel joy and sorrow at one time?"

"A little of that is in my heart also, Sabia. I rejoice that I go on a great adventure. Yet I feel sorrow to think of you, my girl. Merrily enough the world wags for such as I. My good fortune is secure. The more reason that I should think of you, so slight and so small and left to battle on by yourself."

"Bless me now, Estercel. And when you are far away, name me always by name in your prayers; believe me, I shall know."

Estercel put a great hand on the girl's head.

"God and the saints keep you," he said. "In truth you are dear to me, and glad I shall be to see your face again."

"I am content then, Estercel. Farewell and God keep you."

The hand was removed from her head; as it descended Sabia caught and held it in both her own: it was indeed a great hand and a great arm, well-shaped and well-muscled, firm as if sculptured in stone. On the smallest of the fingers shone the twisted ring of gold. Sabia bent her head and left a kiss as light as the floating downs of September upon the ring.

Then slipping from her seat without sigh or sound she went away, flitting like a brown moth on the side of the hill.

In the morning great was the commotion, as Estercel, heir of his uncle's house, rode southward with his little troop, Owen Joy, long-faced and long-headed, behind his back to moderate his youth.

In the embrasure of the narrow window of the tower Sabia stood with her nurse and watched him without sign or sound.

When the last sight of them riding between wood and hill was gone, Sabia turned about.

"Nurse Phaire," said she, "many and many is the bottle of physic you have made me swallow. Yours was the charm of the ring. I know that your knowledge of herbs is great. You must now make me your disciple. It is Tyrone's advice to me that I should learn the proper manner of healing the sick. What way shall I set about it?"

The old woman looked keenly out of her bright blue eyes upon her young charge.

“ God bless the charm! ” said she. “ And a thousand blessings on the head of the O’Neil. My brown girl is in better heart this day. The matter is easily arranged. Well does the country know the skill of old Nurse Phaire. I will give orders that all the sick and wounded be brought to the castle - yard, and there with the blessing of God you and I will operate on them each morning.”

“ Better could not be,” answered Sabia. “ Your draughts, nurse, are bitter; but bitterer is sickness to the sick. And specially, Nurse Phaire, I would learn the care of wounds. It is not likely that Estercel will be overtaken by sickness; but wounded he may be. What is one man against all the armies of Elizabeth? In my dreams I see the ocean covered with the white-sailed ships that are coming up against us. And my heart is so faint when I wake that I wish I might never have waked again. Is it any wonder that I am fearing for Estercel? ”

CHAPTER VIII

THE MIRROR CHAMBER

FOR twenty years the windows of Hone House had looked down expressionless upon the thoroughfare of Warden Street in Dublin. An April morning, two days after Estercel had ridden away southward, saw their sleeping rows wake up to life again. Behind them was a stirring and movement of passing forms: then a corner casement opened and a face like the morning looked out.

The house was old, built of a cagework of oak beams: the panes in the latticed windows were of thick greenish glass. A girl leaned on the window-sill with forearms interlaced, wrist and elbow, and her forehead all but touched the window frame above.

Confident in her rank, she was clothed in a vest of the forbidden crocus-dyed linen; forbidden because the great Elizabeth held that the saffron was a disloyal colour. Her white neck was tall and well reared up. Her countenance was very fresh and full of life and bloom. Bound about her head was a mass of hair of a copper-golden colour. The early morning sunbeams seemed of their own accord to seek her out, they darted upon her, glad to find a brightness as living as their own. Then gliding by and around her they entered the room in shining ranks, swift to seek admittance where barred shutters had so long denied them a path.

The chamber from which this beauty leaned was plain

even to sternness: it was panelled in wood, long and narrow, and on the boarded floor lay the shadow of the maiden's head cast large behind her by the level morning beams.

In one corner stood a bed with a woollen coverlet and heavily tasselled bed-cushions. A large chest, an elbow-chair, and little else besides completed the furniture of the room.

On the wall, at right angles to the door, hung a mirror; it was round and thick, with an embossed rim of brass.

The beauty presently left her post at the window and, approaching the mirror, looked earnestly at her own reflection that moved in its depths.

There she herself, the room, and everything which it contained were given back in a different hue from that which in reality they wore. The yellow light of the sun shone in the room and the hue of the chamber was brown: the light that shone in the mirror was blue and glittering grey. The face that inhabited the mirror gazed back at the true face in the room with a different expression. The face in the mirror was beautiful but cold: the eyes had a glitter, the lines of the cheek and chin were harder, the brow chill and empty.

But even as it appeared, the sight of the face in the mirror seemed to delight the girl as she gazed: it was the first mirror she had ever been able to call her own. She leaned close and smiled at the face in the glass; opened her hazel eyes widely, then cast them down. Unfastening a coil of her hair, she carried it across her brows, winding it in the form of a coronet; then she turned her tall neck this way and that, striving to catch the reflection of her side face in the glass. At last, in a sort of ecstasy, she laughed aloud, flung her arms

above her head, dropped them again, and leaning forward kissed the cold lips that met hers in the mirror.

As she did so, she seemed to feel a sudden chill, for she shivered as she turned away, and walking back into the sunbeams, took her place at the window again.

She breathed deep as she leaned on the sill: the smell of the town was delightful to her who had breathed only country airs; the cagework houses roofed with shingles were a wonder to her; hardly a thatch was to be seen; a narrow passage for foot people was laid down one side of the street; and the sound of passing feet upon the smoothed stone was so unusual to her ears that she almost held her breath to listen.

From the manner and expression of her countenance it would have been hard to predict a future for her, or to tell her nature, so open and alive did she seem to influences coming by way of every channel through which apprehension is possible. She was smiling now as she said to herself: "A kincob gown: to think of me in a kincob gown! How shall I look in the mode of the English court? I must hold myself stately and think before I speak, that they may not take me for a country maid."

As idly thinking she thus gazed out upon the world there came a noise of horses: Meraud leaned further out to see them pass. Down the street rode a little troop; their leader was a young man of about twenty-two years of age, with a great frame and a rejoicing countenance and strong golden locks upon his neck. He was mounted on a vast white horse, mud to the shoulder. Well up to him rode a sensible middle-aged looking man, and behind again two strong serving-men or retainers, dressed in the Irish fashion of tunics with short mantles.

All their horses were magnificent; in hard condition from far travelling, but evidently, for strength and spirit, the darlings of the men that rode them.

The girl in the window gazed eagerly out; it was the man on the white horse who drew her gaze.

"Oh, what a beauty! Who can he be?" she murmured. "His horse is muddled. He must have come by the Dane's Gate and St. Mary's Ford. I wish to my heart he would look up."

So brightly did the sunlight fall upon her brightness that the whole troop saw her and raised their eyes together, and not one of them but smiled. But the young beauty only looked at the leader; for one moment his glance that looked up and hers that looked down met, either half way; then, in a second, he was gone; a wild impulse seized the girl; like a white and golden bird she spread her arms as though she would fly from the window and follow him.

Even as she did so she felt a smart rap on her shoulder; she started and turned to find her father's sister, the dispossessed Abbess of Mellifont, standing beside her. This lady was a strange figure, tall, deadly pale, with white uncovered hair, and the straight white dress of a nun. She wore a look of sad authority, and seemed, and was, a creature who had her being in a different world from that of the young girl whom she now confronted.

"Thou naughty girl!" she said. "To lean so from the window; is this thy country fashion?"

But the snows of December cannot teach the leaves of June. Meraud cast down her eyes, then raised them again, her cheeks flushed, her glance half mutinous, half perforce submissive.

Then through the open door sailed another lady, large and bustling with a ruddy face.

"What now, sister?" she cried. "What does she amiss?"

"Even now I caught her half her length out of the window that she might look after passing riders," said the pale lady solemnly.

"Thou ape, thou baggage!" cried the other. "I will teach thee to expose thyself and disgrace the house. Fie on thee!" and raising her hand she delivered a sound box of the ear on the side of the beauty's head; for Lady FitzPierce was the mother of many children, and had had much experience in the ordering and governing of the young.

"Good aunt, good mother!" cried the girl, her hand to her smarting cheek, half in tears, half angry, for she had spirit; "what creature alive so newly come to town but would fain look out of window?"

"Dost thou answer me again?" began the ruddy lady, in high tones; then being the girl's mother, she melted into a smile at the sight of her fresh young beauty. "Ah, well, young cocks love no coops, nor pullets neither: thou art but a child: out nettle, in dock, say I: come kiss me then, and lean no more out of window."

The girl came reluctantly enough to receive the hearty kiss which her mother bestowed upon her. But the elder lady never troubled about the younger one's feelings. She was already bustling about the chamber, examining the old chest, the pillows on the bed, and finally coming to a stand before the mirror on the wall. With interest and enjoyment she peered into its depths and arranged her head-dress.

The abbess came and stood beside her; her eyes, too,

had been travelling round the chamber, but with a far different look; to one sister belonged the care of the body, to the other the care of the soul.

"I marvel at your disposing, sister FitzPierce," said the nun. "This is no chamber for a young maid. At least let this vain toy be covered with a cloth. Who knows what evil thing may have looked in it and left some of itself behind?"

Lady FitzPierce dropped her arms and stared in the mirror with a face full of fear.

"The saints be about us," she cried as she crossed herself hastily; "isn't this the terrible world we live in?"

"You may say so indeed, sister," said the other, clasping and unclasping her hands while she spoke, and looking now to the young girl, now to her mother, "a terrible world and a terrible country and a terrible town. Was it not in this very house that lived that son of Belial, the Lord of Bodergan, that ate up the convent of Slough? Was it not to this house he brought that wanton wife of his out of London to make jewels for whose neck the holy vessels were melted down? Who knows but in this very room she attired herself in the fruit of sacrilege for the delight of her lovers? Sister, I charge you, let Father Clement and Father Francis be sent for that they may sprinkle this house with holy water and burn incense, and by their prayers drive out them that are in this place?"

Lady FitzPierce fidgeted about the room. "Well, well, sister, I will see. These holy men will do nothing without a fee. No penny, no paternoster. And Sir John keeps me very short. But what is this? As I'm a living woman, here is a cupboard in the wall. Oh

sister, maybe there is treasure in it!" And she pulled and twisted the wooden knob that projected from a square panel; then using all the strength of a strong arm, with a wrench she forced the door open.

The three ladies came eagerly forward to look; the cupboard was small and dark and strangely smelling; there were but two shelves, and at first they appeared empty. Then Lady FitzPierce snatched up from the far dark corner, first one, then another small object, which she eagerly examined.

"Ah—ha!" said the pale abbess in tones of horror. "It is even as I thought. Playing-cards in a maiden's chamber! Praise be to the saints that these weapons of Satan are rapt from their hiding-place and not left to breed mischief behind the wall. Give them to me, sister, that I may burn them."

"Nay, then, indeed," said Lady FitzPierce, "these are no fitting toys for Meraud, but for Sir John they will do right well. They are something used, something dirty, but of a very pretty fancy. La, here are mottoes round the edge of each one, and godly ones, too; as you know, sister, I dote upon mottoes," and she slipped the pack into a capacious pocket that hung by her side. Next she took from the shelf a small earthenware jar; the top came off easily, and in it was a black paste.

"Now what is this, in the name of goodness?" said Lady FitzPierce.

"God knows," said the abbess, while she hunted in the cupboard on her own account. "Poison most like or the woman's lip-salve or her raddle; but see now, sister, said I not well that the chamber was accursed? the violated vessel cried to me from the wall." In her hand, that was soiled with dust, she showed a blackened,

broken ornament of gold, which might have been the handle of a chalice, for at one end was a wrenched piece of worked gold that still adhered to it.

"Look how it is broken," cried the girl; "good aunt, good mother, shall I have it?"

"No, child," said Lady FitzPierce, holding out her hand. "Give it to me, sister, that I may show it to Sir John."

"Nay," said the abbess, "from holy church this gold was taken; to the church it must be returned," and raising her gown she quickly tucked the ornament into a pocket she carried beneath it. For a moment the two elder ladies looked wickedly upon each other, then the stronger eye of the abbess conquered and Lady FitzPierce, feigning to remember the needs of her eight other children, sharply bade Meraud dress herself suitably and hurried from the room.

Pleased at her victory, the abbess remained a moment behind. As she looked meditatively round the chamber, her eye fell once more upon the mirror.

"Daughter," she said, "I will cover over this glass. They that look in mirrors leave somewhat of themselves therein. I would not that thine innocent image should companion there with sin. They that dip in strange waters may chance to leave a plume behind." So saying she took a white napkin that lay beside a ewer and neatly and dexterously wrapped the round mirror up.

"Child," she said, looking at the white cloth, then down at her own white robe, "would I could even so wrap thine innocency about. I greatly fear the dangers of this bad town. The very stones of the street breathe out folly and sin, and youth oftentimes runs mad upon novelty and pleasure. Take warning, child, lean no

more out of the window; nay, look not in the street at all; and, above all, see that thou go not near the mirror."

But Meraud smiled behind her good aunt's back as the white robe disappeared in the dark passage-way; quietly she shut the door, went to the mirror, plucked the cloth away, and flung it to the end of the room. Then, laughing, stretched her arms wide, went to the window, leaned out, and breathed deep of the morning air. She pictured again the rider she had seen on the white horse. "I like him better than any one I have seen," she said to herself. "I choose him now, and I will soon come to speak with him in spite of them."

She bethought herself then, that of all the spoil of the cupboard nothing had fallen to her share but the little earthenware pot. So she went and fetched it. "It's a wonder they left it to me," said she to herself. With her finger she tapped on the paste: it was quite hard; taking a small knife from her girdle she raised the crust on the top; below it was still soft, lighter in colour, and diffused an unknown perfume.

Meraud dipped her finger in it; it was stained carmine. Carrying the pot over to the mirror, she lifted her finger and soon a spot of brilliant colour glowed upon either cheek. Charmed with the sudden change she saw, she turned her tall neck from side to side and laughed again; then by a sudden instinct passed her finger upon her lips.

And now a new face seemed to gaze back to her, charged with some message she could not comprehend. The smile faded from her face. That gleaming mouth, those forward-searching eyes, where had she beheld them in any dream? Alarmed at what she had done, she hastened and took water and washed her face;

many times over she had need to do it before the stain would leave it.

When it was gone, her uneasiness vanished and her joyous mood returned. Outside the April sun was shining over the city roofs; new sounds for ever came up from the street; was not the great Earl of Essex expected to land that very day? Even as she went to the window, there came from far away a murmur that struck upon the ear; it seemed at first like the humming of surf on a distant shore; or was it the sound of a beaten drum? From far away the noise came nearer, till it might be known for the steady furious gallop of a body of horse, coming from the south, passing the city gates and going by to the north. Excited by the sound, Meraud craned far out from her top window: her keen young eyes, far sighted as an eagle's, were fixed on a strip of road like a cut ribbon, all she could see of the way they must pass. In an instant it was covered, and by the wildest riders ever she had seen, and that in a country of the greatest horses of the world. Bays and browns were these horses, some in their stride, some at the top of the bound, three foot in the air, their four hoofs together—for a moment only she saw them and they were passed from her sight. Essex then had landed—the posts were gone by to Tyrone!

CHAPTER IX

THE YOUNG STUDENT

MERAUD was hooded when she entered the house of her uncle, Lord Clancarty. The first person her eye lit on was Lady Clancarty, a small old woman in stiff black clothes, who tilted her head backwards to gaze at a great young man who bent his down to her, stuttering.

Now Meraud was a free and bold maiden, formed by nature to lead and command. What she desired, that she would have; what she determined on, that she would do. The scruples and coyness and titterings of other maidens were strange to her altogether.

Flinging her hood to the woman who attended her, she crossed the hall and sank a very fine curtsey in front of her small aunt.

"Give you good-day, aunt," says she. "The young gentleman seems short of his English. I am come in a fortunate time to assist you with some good Gaelic."

"Welcome, great niece," said the old lady, in the clear and fine English learned at the court of Elizabeth. "How is your honoured father and your excellent mother? I am at a loss in talking to this young man; for Latin and Gaelic are as difficult of speech to me as the English to him."

Meraud turned herself about and spoke to the young man in Gaelic. He answered in brief speech, looking on her with a smile as she on him.

It was strange to see those two in the dark hall, beside the small old woman in black; out of the old woman's

eyes looked the deep piercing experience of thought; between her brows stood wisdom and kindly craft. They thought not of her nor did they understand her; but she looked at them and read them up and down like words in a printed book, or like two lilies growing side by side in a field. Well companioned they seemed, both tall, both strong, young, and fair. They had both the composure of beauty, the physical dignity that comes of a large and handsome make of body and limb; each, he far north, she far south, had had a common rearing in field and wood and hills.

“Noble person,” Meraud was saying, “what is your name, and to what sept do you belong? What errand has brought you to the city?”

“Beautiful woman,” he answered, “my name is Estercel. I am of the O’Neils. My errand is to the most powerful Earl of Essex, who I am told holds a commission to pass the gently bred youth of Ireland to the colleges of Oxford.”

Meraud translated his reply faithfully to her aunt; then turned back to the young man and looked him up and down.

“Estercel of the O’Neils,” said she. “You do not appear to me to be one greatly in need of the learning to be found in books.”

Her hazel-brown eyes travelled over him; to the young man it seemed as though two clear lamps were held up before him; to her it seemed that she had never before seen so goodly a creature whether among beasts or men. The noble head and neck towered above the splendid shoulders; the strong locks lay upon the neck. Clear, large, and grey the eyes looked forth from his composed countenance.

"You have the appearance," she went on, "of a man knowing neither fear nor the need of walls and doors and streets to guard him. God knows I have a reverence for the learned, but they are commonly undersized, or else weak of bone or of spirit."

Estercel looked solemnly upon her; his brain was working in his head, and although his eyes were cheerful he spoke craftily.

"Yet there are many lusty monks," he said.

"Nay," said Meraud, "the monks have need of strength of limb, both to run from the officers of Elizabeth's religion and to guard any pieces of property that may be left them, but pure learning has no need to be either active or strong."

Estercel continued to gaze on the maiden, but kept his mouth shut.

"Come now," said she, "tell me and I will tell nobody else. It was not for college you were bound on that white horse. What would you be doing with him in a university?"

A broad and eager smile lit the face of Estercel. "Ah, then, and it was you looking from the window?" said he; "and so you have seen Tamburlaine—isn't he the beauty of the world? Did you notice the mane he has got? The strength and the curl of it?—it's like a lion's; and the hind leg action of him, the way he springs from his hocks as if he could carry the world on his back and go to the moon with it. Oh! he's a great beast. I love him as if I were his father."

"Dearly I would like to ride on such a horse," said Meraud, and her eyes kindled. "I have but a bay pony here in Dublin and he is fat and quiet."

"Tamburlaine will let no man but me upon his back,"

said Estercel; "but who knows? he might take a fancy to you. Therefore, beautiful maiden, if you will come to the meadow beyond Mary's Gate at seven of the clock to-morrow morning . . ."

"Niece," interrupted Lady Clancarty, "what is the gentleman saying?"

"He is discoursing of his horse," said Meraud, turning to her aunt with a grave countenance. "I ask your pardon, aunt, for having talked so long with him and you not understanding. His speech is all of his white horse, Tamburlaine, and of the colleges of England whither he desires to go for his better education. He wishes to have speech of the noble Earl of Essex."

"He has a good conceit of himself. And would not a less man serve him?" said Lady Clancarty. "Is the young gentleman's education, or his white horse, an affair of state?"

Meraud laughed. "I suspect him other than what he says," she answered. "Help him to speak with Lord Essex, aunt, if you love me, if only for the sake of his fine appearance."

"Out upon thee, thou naughty baggage," said Lady Clancarty. "What should a maiden know of the comeliness of men?"

"I care not, aunt," said Meraud. "You know my humour. I will make no pretence of bashfulness. Other maidens may pretend blindness; but for me, I know a man when I see one. And there he stands."

"I have a mind to correct you, Termagant," said Lady Clancarty sternly.

"Ah, but you will not!" said Meraud, flinging her arms about the other's shoulders, "because you are

small of stature and I am great. Also there is an ancient affection between us, be I Termagant or no."

"You will oblige me by moving two paces off at the least, niece. I like no female antics under the eyes of gentlemen." And she waited till Meraud had obeyed.

"Now tell the young gentleman in decent terms that if he will come again to-morrow evening at six of the clock I will do for him what I may."

CHAPTER X

TAMBURLAINE AT PLAY

AT seven o'clock next morning the wild Meraud, hooded and cloaked, went on her way at a good pace to St. Mary's meadow. The gates were open and she passed freely out and went on, looking sharply this way and that over the fields. Soon far off she spied two moving figures, a white and a brown, that came hastening towards her. The wonder was to see them come. Estercel ran, his locks on the wind, his hands thrust within the leathern belt of his tunic, and round about him galloped, leaping, the monstrous white stallion. His red mouth was open, and from his round snorting nostrils came his breath; his gleaming, polished eyes shone in his head, and there was no spot on his beautiful white hide. So lively and full of youth and delight was the sight that Meraud laughed out, flung back her hood and loosed her mantle, and ran to meet them.

"So you have come, beautiful girl," said Estercel. "I am glad to see you, and so is my horse."

"You appear to be at play together like a couple of children," said Meraud.

"We are indeed," said Estercel. "It is this way that I train him; every morning of his life (for I had him when he was but a foal of six months) I have taken him to play for an hour. He would break his heart if I were to forget him. When I am at home he comes to call me himself. See now I will show you how strong his love is. Will you strike me now in play?"

Meraud turned round to where the horse stood, his head tossing up and down to his broad chest, his hoofs far apart and firmly planted, his eyes fixed upon her as if questioning himself concerning her disposition. Meraud smiled provokingly at the animal and nodded her head to him, then raising her hand she struck Estercel a light blow on the cheek.

The effect on the horse was fearful; he uttered a low and horrid scream, laid back his ears and bared his teeth, while his mane seemed to roughen itself, like a wild beast's hair; in a moment all beauty and kindness had left him, and like some terror of another world he rushed upon the maiden, rearing his front hoofs in the air that he might strike her down with them. But Estercel was beforehand; he ran and leapt on his neck, put his two hands upon his eyes, and whispered fondly in the ear of his friend. The horse stood still and listened, his head began to droop, his breath still panted in his quick-heaving sides and through his nostrils, while he leaned his neck lovingly on Estercel.

"I have told him it was only play," said Estercel. "Come now, Meraud, and make friends with me that he may learn to know and like you too."

Meraud approached a little timidly, for the beast had terrified her with its awful appearance of rage; he was still looking upon her sideways with the white of an eye.

"I dare not, Estercel," said Meraud. "I am afraid of him, and I never was afraid of a horse before."

"Little wonder, noble girl," said Estercel proudly. "Do you know that I count him the equal of twelve men in a fight? He would frighten anybody. But look at him now; he is all love. Unless he is angry he

would not hurt a child. I have seen him sweat and shake for stepping on a little rabbit. If you will come and make friends with me he will be pleased with you in a minute."

Meraud still looked doubtfully at the great beast who rolled the white of his eye at her.

"I could fancy him jealous, Estercel," said she.

"Not at all," he answered. "He is not so mean as that. My friends are his friends, and I am the friend of any one who does him a kindness."

A wicked light lit up Meraud's eyes. Estercel's attention was entirely upon his horse; proudly and affectionately he stroked the shining white neck; he never looked at her at all; a sudden impulse overcame her prudence; with an unnatural boldness she approached the youth, laid an arm upon his neck, and reaching upward kissed his cheek once and then again.

Somewhat astonished, Estercel turned his eyes upon the maiden, then back again upon the horse, who had raised his head and was regarding her with interest. Meraud's cheek had turned pale and for the first time in her life she trembled.

"I thank you, noble girl, for complying with my request," said Estercel, courteously, "and now look at my horse; he is grateful to you also; you can place your hand upon him without fear."

Willingly Meraud turned from the youth and going fearlessly to Tamburlaine she stroked and caressed that noble head, forgetting for a moment her secret thought to admire the life and intelligence that streamed from his eyes, answering her own, almost as though in that strange and outlandish shape there lived a spirit akin to hers.

"Stand away now," said Estercel, "and I will show you what he can do," and he called and spoke to the horse as a shepherd might to his dog.

On the instant Tamburlaine reared upwards, and wheeling upon his hind-quarters, with tossing mane, plunged forward in a gallop; down the field he went and back again; but as he came near and just as Estercel whistled with a loud shrill call, he seemed to stumble and come down to his knees, and then falling sideways lay prostrate on the ground.

"Holy Mother," cried out Meraud, "he is down! Was it a hole? Is his leg broke or what?"

"Come and see," said Estercel, and together they ran to the side of the horse where he lay motionless, with not a sign of life. Estercel lifted a foreleg and it fell back helpless; with tears in her eyes Meraud went on her knees and stroked that large strange head, throwing back the rippled white locks of the mane and striving to look into the full half-shut eye.

"Poor thing, poor thing, oh, what a pity!" she kept saying anxiously, and then the large eyes opened clear upon her and the lip curled and a strange whistling sound came from the nostril.

Meraud started. "Upon my honour he is laughing at me! Oh, and you are laughing too! Oh, it is too bad, it is a trick and nothing the matter!"

And she started up and away, Estercel laughing loud and long and guiding her further back with his hand. He called and spoke to the horse, who gathered his legs under him and with a struggle that sent the clods of grass-tufted earth flying he was up again, and coming to his master was feeling with his lips at the pouch he wore.

"Did you ever see the like of that?" said Estercel

proudly. "Is not that a wise horse? Could a man do more? He is fit to lead an army this moment. But wait till you see one trick more. Only first he must have his reward." Opening his pouch, he drew out a round cake and gave it to the horse, who took it piece by piece, eating daintily and with cleanliness, tossing his head gently up and down to show his pleasure in his master's kindness.

"It is wonderful to see him," said Meraud. "You would say he understood the thoughts in your mind."

"He does," answered the other. "I know he does. I know he longs to be a man."

"Perhaps he would not be so happy then," said the girl.

"Maybe not," answered he, and for a moment the look of youthful happiness left his face and the smiling lips closed tight and stern: seeing which the horse lifted his head and reached forth an immense tongue to lick his master's face; but Estercel was too quick for him, and laughing out caught him a slap with his open hand on the side of his face. Then seizing his head in his two hands Estercel whispered in his ear: turning to Meraud he said, "We are going to show you one trick more; it is my turn now." Beginning to run swiftly, he traversed the field. Tamburlaine remained beside the girl, watching his master, and blowing through his nostrils, while he beat upon the ground with his hoofs.

Estercel turned and came back as the horse had done; when he was near to Meraud, he called with a short bird whistle of two notes and then dropped as he ran and lay motionless. Instantly Tamburlaine plunged forward; he was beside his master in a moment, and stooping in his trot, caught his leather belt between his teeth, then

planting his feet firmly wide apart, he swung the man, tall, heavy-boned as he was, first into the air, and then with a circular sweep of his strong neck sideways and towards his back. Estercel seemed to catch hold and spring, and in a second he was upright on the animal's back, and going at a gallop round the field. Coming round to Meraud again where she stood: "I'll take you up," he shouted; "give me your hand and step on my foot and spring," and as the pair came by Meraud made ready, seized the hand held out to her, and with a rapid bound was in her seat, her arm round Estercel's waist and her cheek on his shoulder. The motion of the gallop was violent beyond anything she had felt. She had well seen his action from the ground; how he gathered all four hoofs under him in his leap, and coming to ground with all four at once, leapt again from his mighty hind-quarters. The very air seemed to rock as she went, but for all that a strange sort of joy seemed to settle upon her. She felt the spring wind and heard a lark singing as it went up from the grass into the sky, and wished she might ride so for ever. But even as she thought it her ears, trained from birth in the stillness of an idle land, had caught, beneath the thunder of the white horse's tread, the faint intimation of another sound like an echo from miles away. Estercel heard it too, for he checked the gallop to a trot, and then to a walk, and at last stood still.

And "Do you hear a sound?" said Meraud.

"I do," said he; "get down, noble girl, and I will get down too. I must be sure what that noise is."

"It is all very well to say 'get down,' " said Meraud, "but your horse is very high, full nineteen hands, and it seems to me a long way to the ground."

"What could happen to you?" said Estercel. "I am afraid you are very foolish. You have nothing to do but to slide down and it is what any child of four years could do. But if you are afraid, you can step on my foot, and jump forward, only make haste, noble maiden, for I wish to find out what is that noise."

With a sigh and a laugh Meraud prepared to slide, as right well she knew how, and came safely to the ground. In an instant Estercel was beside her.

"That hillock there is good for sound," said he, pointing his finger to a little hill at a distance. "There is no passage for it underground here where we stand."

With a word to his horse, who stood obedient and motionless, he ran to the hill and cast himself down, ear to the ground, while Meraud did the same. As if a door had been opened, most wonderfully there came to their ears the noise of an innumerable tread: hoof of horse and foot of man and the rolling of wheels. Heavy was the noise and great. Who can tell how far the sound of it ran through the earth, north, south, east, and west, by its trembling reverberations to warn the hearts of men? Estercel groaned as he lay to hear it. Meraud lifted up her head and gazed upon him. His eyes were closed, and his lips parted, and an expression of anguish stiffened upon his face.

"Aha," said the girl to herself as she looked, "you are no queen's man. I know you for what you are, coming from Tyrone's country and all. You are no boy to be looking for an English college. I have you now in my hand to play with!"

Even as she looked at him, he raised his head and stood up.

"We had better be going," he said. "That is no

common sound. Any one would say the whole world was come to Ireland." He looked keenly at Meraud, who gave him no straight look back, but turned the corner of her shining wine-coloured eye upon him. It was the look of the enchantress, while his was the hero's gaze.

The emotion left his face. Cold and grave he said to her: "Now, noble girl, we have had our play and I thank you for coming, but it is time you were safe at home. Will you ride now to the gate?"

"I will go my own way and on foot," said the damsel; then with a wicked smile she asked: "And when I am got home, shall I speak with my uncle to procure you speech of the Lord Essex on the subject of the English colleges, or have you perhaps other means of your own for getting at him and other matters to discuss?"

Estercel's cheek whitened over as a cruel anger rose in his breast. Meraud saw her danger and trembled before it; instinct warned her that here was a man whole and strong, who would destroy, and that at once, the fairest creature alive that played the traitor. For one moment he and the white horse behind him seemed to grow in stature before her eyes till they seemed something huge and terrible.

With a gasp, the evil spirit left her, conjured away by fear; with gentle looks and pale and speaking face she went near and said to him: "Do not look so fierce all in a moment. I meant no harm and was only in play. Sure what do I know of you but that you are beautiful and kind? I only ask for your friendship."

"I give no friendship to false faces," said Estercel, in cold rage. "You have taken my hand and sat on the

back of my horse: ay, and more than that, you put a kiss on my cheek. And was it a spy you were all the time?"

Fierce and hard was his look, but Meraud's courage rose too. "Ay, and I would kiss you again for a penny," she said with a smile. "I am no spy. Would you fight with a girl?"

"Ay," said he, "that I would. For there are women as I know that have sold the men that trusted them. And but now it seemed to me that you were the sort."

"No, no," said she, and her bold and open look was her very own. "I love no underhand ways, but always speak my mind. Do not get in a passion like a foolish child, but ask yourself and see would I have given you the hint that I knew what you would be at if I meant spying?"

"Well, and that is true," said Estercel more doubtfully. "But, indeed, your wicked look shook my very heart. Perhaps I have done wrong to speak with you at all, knowing all the danger of the times."

"Indeed you have done no wrong, and you shall not repent speaking with me," said Meraud earnestly. "Trust me now. I will be your friend, I will not ask to know what you are after. I should break my heart to lose your friendship."

"It is very hard to deal with women," said Estercel. "If you were another man I would know what to do, break you over my knee or else I would swear brotherhood in all things with you, but you are a girl, and the most strange and wonderful ever I saw. I don't know how to manage you at all," and he stared helplessly at her.

Meraud laughed, a wild sweet laugh. Her danger was over. She sprang forward and kissed his hand: then fleet almost as the white horse himself, she ran forward towards the gate of the town. But as she went, she cried to herself in a sobbing voice: "I am bewitched! I am bewitched! What in the world has come into my heart to make me so bold all in a moment?"

CHAPTER XI

IN THE CATHEDRAL

WHAT a day was that on which Essex rode to take the sword at St. Patrick's Cathedral! Such state had never been seen, not in Ireland certainly, not in England at the coronation of Essex's great mistress Elizabeth. The sun shone; the breeze, half salt, half sweet, wavered and turned between mountain and sea. White clouds balanced uncertainly, seemed to wait upon their wings to behold the shining river of gorgeous men that streamed along the city streets.

Four hundred and eighty great gentlemen rode at Essex's back. The gold of the new world, silk and satin of the old, shone and glistened in the eye of the day. Above in the windows of the tall houses crowded many faces; a deaf man seeing those open mouths might have heard the shouting. Below, rags and hunger and hatred were grouped with the white-coated foot soldiery. A hedge of shining jewel-like eyes of the wretched watched flowing the gorgeous river of the inheritors of the earth.

Behind the gentlemen adventurers came an endless file of orange-coated horsemen; here and there you might see an honest English face fresh from the plough; most of them were rogues and worse—savages full of the lust to trample and devour.

Earth and sky openly smiled, yet a lover of the land might have felt her tremble as this thorn entered her

side from the east. Rome never trembled before the Goths as did those tormented ones before the gorgeous procession of gentlemen adventurers, formidable, hungry, every man of them, for spoil.

Inconstant April airs, blue sky, rags and beggary, and orange-coated horsemen, all remained outside the cathedral. Within was the music of trumpets, harps, and drums; an incredible glance and blaze of gorgeous colours, the perfume of silks fresh from the loom, and a noise and rumour of voices.

The smaller companies of the ladies had already arrived and sat like a bed of bright garden flowers disposed in the nave, bright indeed, but less adorned than their lords. Up the middle aisle came Essex, shining in the queen's colour of snow white, hung with chains of heavy gold, gallant in his masculine beauty, majestic in his port. Thousands of eyes followed him and a murmuring filled all the arches of the cathedral.

No more eager pair of eyes followed the passage of the great Essex than those of Meraud, where she sat forward by the side of a pillar, penned in the rear of her mother and aunt and other reputable ladies loyal to the queen's government and of high position. Angry and impatient, Meraud sat and stood; she had that in her bosom that little consented with soft imprisonments and restraints. Now she flung herself backward, now stood up or stepped upon her chair, where her tall shoulders rose above the crowd, and her good mother turned about and angrily beckoned to cause her to descend: but in vain, for from this post she could see all around; see all the stir among the cathedral arches where the people turned and repassed like a field of sea-birds new come from the sea. Many feelings, strange and new, rose in

her breast, the desire to lead, to be at least among the first, to be away from these tamed ladies who were so poor of spirit: for there are found among men and women beings that breathe more naturally among the great, and whose strength and ardour teach them to climb continually; and of such was Meraud: but another feeling possessed her, and sent her glances fleeing abroad, seeking continually for the golden-locked hero whose beauty had bewitched her. And at the back of all was the imperious desire to know and understand the secret intrigues and the hidden movements of the time.

As Essex passed up the centre aisle, the Earl of Southampton at his shoulder, behind him a never-ending procession of manhood, gorgeous to the eye, thrice gorgeous in renown, Meraud's heart leaped in her breast at the gallant sight. And when Essex, burning like a white star of magnitude, stood high above them all, lifting to the chancel roof the sword that proclaimed him the queen's regent, the arbiter of Ireland's destiny, she forgot Estercel and thought only of powers and thrones. How could she dream the truth of that shining uplifted figure? dream that that noble head was a marked prey and even now rocking upon his neck? But she was to have an inkling at least of how matters stood. For as it is upon the edges of the sea that the foam creeps and whitens, so along the outskirts of the splendid crowd there rose now and then a whispering, the hissing whispers of plotters and ill-wishers. When Meraud leaned against the pillar, round the stone cylinder a small whispering voice reached her, and another answered, bitter as a dried lemon.

Meraud leaned backward, but no more could she see than a red satin sleeve of a curious fashion, all gathered

and drawn and pinked; and part of a man's leg, and that by no means a good leg, but well clothed in black hose; so she bent her ear again to listen.

"I will swear to those black hose," said Meraud to herself. "They are those of Sir Xylonides Bullen, him whom I dislike the most of any man in all this town," and while she bent her eye on the singing bishops and all the glory of the chancel that surrounded one shining figure, sword in hand, her ear gathered eagerly the sinister whispering that ran on the pillar's face.

"The queen's majesty shall know of it," said one voice. "Look at him, a crown on his head and garments of such state, never saw I the like. The queen's majesty herself was coronated in a simple cap of maintenance. Sir Anthony Standen said to me even now that his state is over great. He would make himself a king, that fellow."

"Nay," said the other voice, "he is a king already in his own estimation. It were time her majesty chastised him with something more consummating than a clout upon his ear."

And the men laughed: one of them cackled, the other laughed a soft musical laugh. "He hath run to the length of his tether," said the first voice. "He has unfriends he knows not of: and they have the queen's ear. Hark to this, even now comes her order that Sir Christopher Blount, Essex's man, shall not be sworn of the council. Mark me now, you will see how that council shall guide him to ill purpose. And before long he will find there is a hole in the bottom of his bag of treasure. Great as he appears, I tell you he goes to his undoing."

"Nothing more easy," softly answered the sweeter voice, "than to undo him who is for ever undoing of

himself. I am told there has been open speech between Essex and Sir John Harrington of Tyrone; some scurvy nonsense concerning that base bush-kern's fluency in the French and Italian tongue and of his honourable and courteous bearing. That were vile treason did her majesty hear of it. There is one that has made a note of his very words. Now mark, this town is full of Tyrone's spies; mayhap there are two or three under our polite noses and in this very place. It is but to take and squeeze one of them and the strange matters that come forth can be sorted for her majesty's ears."

"Good: right good. The Tudor lioness raves every day more loudly against the disorders. I myself saw but yesterday a letter in her own handwriting, wherein she spake of those 'base rebels and their golden calf, Tyrone'—her majesty's own words."

Now did Meraud experience those inner excitements that constrict the heart. Pale, two long beams from her narrowed searching eyes visited the crowded rows of upturned faces, as roving bees meet the flowers of a garden, till in a far dark corner they lit on the face of Estercel that watched her from afar.

A spasm contracted her heart as she thought those bitter whisperers might even come to lay hands on her northern hero. She knew but too well what was meant by their squeezing.

CHAPTER XII

CRISPIN AND CRISPINIANUS

EARLY the morning after, Meraud was awakened from her dreams by the sound of a trumpet in the street. It was not long before she was at the window; and there was a trumpeter on horseback crying the play of Crispin and Crispinianus to be played that very day upon the Hoggin Green. Now Meraud had never in her life beheld a play, and soon she was on foot and attiring herself in a white gown of new fashion; also a head-tire so ingenious that the very birds of the air, skilled as they are in weaving, might have envied its neat intricacies.

All the town was pretty near as excited as Meraud. Who thought of rout, defeat, famine, plague, or red death? The gay coats of the soldiers might have been designed for festival, not for murderous war. The sun shone, and the merry tramp of the carpenters' hammers, as they put up the stage upon the green, was heard all through the town.

Rows of benches in front of the stage were provided for Essex and all honourable company. Behind the stage stood up the spring bushes and trees in every shade of purple, brown, and green. Ropes were drawn to keep the soldiery and the common people from pressing upon their betters: from early morning crowds gathered together, as much to see the multitude of the gentlemen as to watch the play.

At last the hour drew near; strange and delightful

appearances began to be seen; and whenever some outlandish creature, such as an angel with wagging, unsteady wings, or a devil with horns and a tail, looked out from behind the bushes, huge was the roar of delight.

But that was nothing to the shouts that greeted Essex as he came on with his gorgeous and somewhat unruly host of gentlemen adventurers. The sun shone upon them as upon some Persian garden, astonished to find such a freedom of colour in a suffering land. Not one of all these men but felt himself too fine for the earth he stepped upon. What was the art and literature of the Celt to these captains? To be near is to be despised. They had smelt the gold of the Aztecs, the silver of Peru, the beauty and magnificence of England, France, and Spain was known to each one of them. Their errand here was one of blood, extermination, and divided lands.

Playing, laughing, jesting, shouting, these fine fellows came on, and the vulgar crowd cheered them again.

The people owed them no worship, no, nor the soldier either. The common soldier was the milch-cow of these captains. Him they starved and robbed of his clothes, his food, his pay, and left him to rot for thanks; yet such power lies in a gold chain and a satin coat and a gay demeanour, that those who had been ready to curse now blessed instead.

Among those whose arrival was most noted by the crowd was Meraud, who walked by the side of her mother with many gentlemen about her. She was half a head taller than any other maiden; not a few of those that looked upon her remarked that in brilliancy of colouring and noble port she was like the Elizabeth of a generation ago, only more fair. Eagerly the girl

looked about her; passion as well as ambition was in her heart; she listened indeed to the compliments of the gentlemen, but she longed most to speak with Estercel.

Soon enough she saw him; how could you pass over a man inches taller than his fellows? He had on a fine brand new suit of brown velvet and a gold chain. She saw more than one man pointing him out, so striking was his appearance of beauty and strength. But much as she wished it, she could not come at him.

By good favour of Sir John Harrington, the queen's own godson, Meraud was well seated to see the play, at the outer end of the very front row of benches which was covered with good crimson cloth. By bending back her head somewhat she could see Essex in his raised seat, dressed this morning in a soldier's coat of blue, with no very pleased expression on his face.

Is there a shadow sent forth by a losing fortune? Can the perturbed soul of a man send forth a gloom that vexes sunshine and dims the colours upon which it falls? It seemed to Meraud as though a heavy air was distilled about the earl marshal as he sat, which infected those that whispered in his ear or stood before him. A bull taken in a net is a strange sight; he turns and rages, knowing right well that he is taken. But what if a bull be taken in a net of which the meshes are invisible while he sees not the hand that throws it?

So it was with the Earl of Essex. Apparently the paramount lord, he began to find himself helpless in the nets of his enemies. His favourite Southampton, whose reminiscences of mad days in Paris were so delightful to him, whose gallant spirit resembled his own, had just been roughly removed by Elizabeth from

his command as Master of the Horse, an intolerable slight to the leader of an army. Struggle as he might, his designs were for ever thwarted by the council; some malign influence breathed upon his army; already their spirit was altered; many of them were sickening, losing heart in the neglected, infected camp which was all that had been prepared for them outside the walls of the town.

But though Essex had a sort of second sight that always made him alive to approaching misfortune, it was only one vein in him that was so. In the main he was careless, generous, and high-mettled. In a second now he threw off his gloom to watch the shoemakers of Dublin go through their lively performance.

A curious mystery it was, and one very astonishing to the vulgar. The play opened with the appearance of two beautiful young cobblers who sat opposite to each other on the ground in chains and leather aprons, with shirts open at the neck, singing a pious Christian hymn. Then entered the gaoler, a surly man with two torturers dressed from head to foot in blood-red. They fall upon the lads, drag them to their feet, saying:

“ Vile ones, you must come away
To the Prefect Rictiovarus.
Tortured you will be this day
Unless your hateful hymns you spare us.”

Striking them repeatedly, they bind them with thongs, drawing them tight:

“ One, two:
Pull, you!
Draw tight!
All is right!”

On the upper stage sits the Prefect Rictiovarus and

his officers and other torturers. The trial scene goes on and to all the threatening curses of the officers who require them to sacrifice to "Jupiter and Mahound" Crispin and Crispinianus answer in sweet broad tones and words of heavenly steadfastness:

" Christ our Lord is our heavenly stay,
Our hearts are with him far away:
We nothing heed your cruel talk,
Our souls in fields of manna walk."

Then Rictiovarus orders the cobblers' awls to be brought.

" As you with fingers do ply your trade
Through your ten fingers these awls shall be driven;
Try now, malfaitours, if help can be had
From your false God and your false heaven."

Meraud turned away her eyes from the stage as, with a parade of cruelty, the torturers ran hither and thither making ready for their dreadful task. She heard the blows of the mallet as the nails were driven through and shuddered; for all about her were cruel men and she was like to see blood and cruelty enough before this war was done. Yes, and pressing up behind the ropes was a coarse soldiery, awed by the mystery, but partly rejoicing in the torturer's work, aye and ready to take the hint and exercise the like practices among the Irish rebels of the north.

Meraud did not lift up her eyes till a sweet voice was heard proclaiming:

" Crispin and Crispinianus lift up their bleeding hands;
And lo! the Virgin Mary! And by her Gabriel stands.
And the azure belt of heaven sends forth its angel bands."

Meraud looked up, and behold another curtain had been drawn, and on a raised platform above stood

Mary, the Virgin, all in blue, and angels and archangels standing about her.

She sends Gabriel down and he touches the fingers of the two lads, and by some sleight of hand the awls fly about in all directions, striking the officers and torturers, who fall down dead. The heavenly host depart, singing a sweet rondel as they go.

Now there was a pause, and the earl descended from his raised seat and, attended by his gentlemen, began to walk up and down in front of the stage. Meraud rose and many gentlemen crowded about her as she too began to pace up and down. Her quick eye soon saw that Estercel was moving slowly nearer and nearer in. A book was in his hand where a sword or an arquebus would have better become him. He was coming to speak with her, she felt, and she stood waiting to receive him; but with a smile he passed on. Meraud looked particularly at him; his face was now pale, and he was frowning. Meraud drew her crimson cloak about her, for the April wind blew fresh and the scene of torture had chilled her blood.

Estercel passed on and his heart was in his mouth. The desperate danger of his position well nigh caused him to shake. Here, before this throng, must his message be delivered, secretly to the ear of one who lived always the centre of a crowd, and who in a moment of impatience or suspicion could give him instantly to a cruel death. But the young man was gifted with a bold and fighting spirit and a mind of single integrity. He did not pause a moment, but approaching Lord and Lady Clancarty, asked to be presented. The moment was well chosen; Essex and his gentlemen in full parade were approaching again, having turned at the far end

of the green. Beautifully the sun shone on their glancing jewels and noble apparel. Lord and Lady Clancarty stood forward a little with Estercel, and chance aided them; for no sooner had Essex, who was a great lover of a noble person, clapped eyes upon Estercel than he stood and exchanged a greeting with Lady Clancarty and with her stout good-humoured husband.

"And who," said he, "is the young giant that carries his book like a weapon and has a face like Gabriel?"

"My lord," said Clancarty, "he is one of the sucking pupils of Oxford; a fine Latin scholar and speaks a fluent French, though he has no English."

"Moreover, my lord," said Lady Clancarty in her dry accents, "he possesses a marvellous great white stallion who loves him like a father, and who he proposes shall share his rooms at the university."

"That indeed is a recommendation," said Essex, smiling. "Tiens, mon ami," said he, addressing Estercel while he scanned him from head to heel, "je vous trouve la taille et la physionomie d'un soldat plutôt que d'un étudiant. J'ai bien peur que tu, un autre Samson, enlèverais les postes de l'université sur les épaules! Pourquoi pas vous enrôler dans le service de sa majesté?"

Estercel bowed profoundly. "Toujours je serais fier d'entrer dans le service de sa majesté. Surtout si je pourrais suivre monseigneur, mais premièrement il me faut la connaissance de la langue Anglaise."

"Quel est ce beau livre, mon gaillard, que tu portes sous bras comme si c'était un pistolet?"

"Ce sont les éigrammes du Docteur Owen, monseigneur,"

"Oh, je les connais déjà," said Essex lightly.

"Mais tenez, monseigneur, voyez ce beau page! Voyez ces illustrations sur le parchemin. Un instant, monseigneur, un pas par ici s'il vous plait, le soleil gêne les yeux. Ecoutez cette epigramme que je suis sur vous ne connaissez pas."

Estercel had purposely from the beginning spoken in a low voice, now he dexterously removed Essex a step or two under pretence of turning back to the sun, and without changing the tone of his voice. Holding open the page on which was emblazoned the well-known four-lined epigram, *Politicus*, "*Dissimula, simula, quoties occasio poscit.*"

He followed the lines with his finger ostensibly reading from the book, first raising his eyes to the face of Essex with a fiery and instant significance. Then in a low voice, but with clearness and tremendous intensity, he delivered his message in the Latin tongue. "I, the messenger of Tyrone and all Ireland, speak as Tyrone to you, Earl Marshal of England. Hear and heed well.

"I, openly your enemy, am secretly your friend.

Many are your apparent friends, who secretly work for your destruction.

Your gallant and generous spirit has conquered me without a battle.

Give me a meeting that I may unmask your foes and give all Ireland into your right hand."

"Read the epigram once again, young man," said Essex blandly. "You have an excellent appreciation of the Latin tongue."

Estercel repeated the epigram. Essex with an apparent carelessness and sang-froid received the copy of the epigrams, remarking on the fine parchment and

decorated script, passed it to an officer, and motioned Estercel to withdraw.

It was over. The message had gone home. Estercel drew back, Essex passed on to his seat. The mystery recommenced. On the stage lay the two lads, Crispin and his brother, moaning and crying, while the gaoler and his men kicked them for sport.

Estercel never marked the play: his face was pale and set, his eye bright; he looked straight before him, seeing nothing but one gallant face and form. Now he might return the way he had come, for his errand was done.

As the thought passed through his mind, there was a slight stir on the bench. On a pretence of the heat and crush, the bold Meraud had forced her mother to change her place, and there she was on the outer seat of the crimson bench looking up at him with a face like a star.

There is a might in beauty, a power and a light that speak to the soul! The very air about the head of Meraud was suffused with a brightness; her hair shook down a radiance that covered her shoulders like a cloak; the long beams of her eyes, were they swords to pierce, or rays of heavenly counselling?

As he gazed, the set pallor of Estercel's face relaxed and his cheek flushed. He turned away his head, for he dared not gaze too long lest he should be overcome. Now while enchantment made music in his brain, a music of another sort was heard from the trees and the bushes; winding in and out came the heavenly company: Christ Himself all in white; the Virgin and the angels came walking, singing as they came. They ascended the stage and approached the prisoners. A light shone and the lads lifted up their heads. At the

same moment, the gaolers fell flat in a swoon. At the command of Christ, Gabriel steps forward and feeds them with the bread of confirmation; then Raphael gives them the wine of prudence in a gold cup. Utterly refreshed, the youths arise, and stand upon their feet with hands crossed and heads bent.

With kind words Christ comforts them:

“ My mother and I will not forsake you.
My grace will suddenly overtake you.
And bring you at last to the place which is
Home of the heavenly Mysteries.”

Then Mary cries:

“ Sing now, Raphael, sing, Uriel!
Comfort their hearts with a sweet rondel! ”

Obediently the archangels answer her, and all the company sing together to the music of flutes:

“ When life is most rough and pain severe,
Bread of the angels is wholesome cheer;
Wine by the hand of Raphael given
Comforts the soul on its way to Heaven.”

Now next to hunting and fighting, there was nothing Estercel loved better than music. His ears were ravished with the harmony of the flutes, and as the heavenly band wound their way through the bushes and the curtain dropped, those unheard musical voices that sing so sweetly within the brain when the lips are closed were chanting in unison with the departing band. While for a moment he had so lost himself, he felt warm fingers seize upon his hand which hung innocently down by his side.

He started and glanced down, and there was Meraud looking up at him with a witch's face, and, moreover,

she had hold of the very finger on which was the twisted gold ring.

"Noble person," said she, maliciously regarding him, "where got you this ring? It is an ugly thing, but curious; take it off that I may inspect it."

"Beautiful girl," answered Estercel, attempting to draw away his hand, "do not meddle with it; it is a fairy ring. Who knows if you took it away from me it might bring a blast upon you?"

"A fairy ring?" said Meraud, looking malignantly at it. "How? Did it come out of a barrow? Did a fairy woman give it you? Wherefore do you wear it?"

Estercel gazed in front of him seeking for a lie that should be convenient and good to be told.

"It is said to be a charm against chincough," said he.

"The chincough!" said Meraud scornfully; "a great man like you to wear a charm against chincough. Nay, now I do not believe you. I do not believe about your ring. It was some woman gave it you, and I do not believe about your colleges either. And I want to know what piece of a book you were reading to my Lord of Essex?" And she made her eyes as narrow as two slits.

Estercel turned and looked upon her with a solemn face. "For two pennies I would correct you," he said.

Meraud laughed and threw off her malicious look, but she never left him alone. Even when Crispin and Crispinianus were thrown into boiling oil and the cauldron burst, and the oil ran over Rictiovarus and scalded him to death, still she secretly teased Estercel. Even when the heads of Crispin and Crispinianus were cut off in the presence of the Emperor Diocletian, still she worried him; and when Beelzebub and Burgibus and

their attendant devils, each with horns and a tail, came for the souls, still she kept one eye on the stage and one eye on Estercel. Yes, and when the archangels and angels came down on the other side and had a fearful combat at soul-snatching, finally driving off the devils and beating them cruelly with staves; even when such wonders as these were enacted, and while Meraud laughed with all the company, gentle and simple, still she was teasing Estercel. And "Stay but two more days," said she, "your education is unfinished. You will gain much by frequenting the gentlemen of the court. Your manners are something rough. I would gladly help to form them. Also I have a great curiosity to know more about this fairy ring," and she sought again to take his hand. But at this moment her lady mother chanced to turn, and—

"My eye is upon you, Meraud," said she. "Do not imagine that while I talk to Sir Anthony Standen yet I cannot at the same time see what goes on behind my back. Unless you alter your behaviour, bitter brewing awaits you at home. After meat, mustard!"

But though Meraud was quelled for a moment as she thought of the mighty alapam she would receive behind doors, yet she soon recommenced her naughty play.

The soul of Delilah is never easy till her Samson is shorn.

CHAPTER XIII

MERAUD GOES TO COURT

At first glance it would have been hard to recognise the wild free-gestured maiden in the splendid lady who stood before the mirror but four days after. The kin-cob gown was on over a satin petticoat: the stiff golden cloth, the large sleeves, the ruff, the decorated head-tire, the tightly cinctured waist combined to disguise the natural form: even the countenance was altered, seeming at once more lavish yet more guarded in its beauty.

It was a wonder, too, to see the chamber. The whole paraphernalia of luxury was there; rich draperies flung down in disorder, combs, ornaments, pots and vials of essences and perfumes. As she stood a moment before the mirror, while impatient voices called her from below, a gorgeous figure in the midst of this disorder, Meraud's face was pale. But an instant before she had stepped back into the chamber for a last look in the glass, and a strange chance had affrighted her.

The late afternoon had grown dusky, and the serving women who had helped her to dress had lit two candles which burned with no very great light. As Meraud hastily approached the mirror whose surface shone palely in the double crossing lights, her own resplendent figure gleamed in it, moving towards her from its furthest depths; behind her there was, or seemed to be for one moment, a something that moved not at all, a face that drew her eyes. It was ruddy-haired like her own, with

crimson cheeks; the red lips were open and the fierce eyes were bent upon her.

With a movement of instinctive horror, Meraud turned about to see what thing stood so menacingly behind her in the room, and when she looked again in the mirror the face was gone. One instant she stood, then obeying the shouts that called her from below, she darted from the room.

Once safe downstairs, Meraud clean forgot her short moment of fear and lived only in the atmosphere of admiration and excitement that surrounded her. A wonder and a novelty was before the door, a coach with six horses, sent by a member of council to draw her and her father to the great assembly at the castle, for not only was her father a man of weight and importance, holding extensive properties in the south and loyal to Elizabeth, but the beauty of Meraud was famous already; for a day of the city is longer than a month of the country.

Fourteen days it was since Essex had landed, fourteen days of deep excitement and unrest, while Essex and the lords of the council debated disposing their armies and arguing their plans of war. From the camp outside the city walls came a rumour that filled the air and lasted from early morning till late at night. This murmur was echoed in men's waking thoughts and even in their dreams.

Never before had such an armament been spied on Irish shores; you might have said that Ireland quaked between her seas at the sound of the war that was to be loosed upon her.

But never before had the men of Ireland been so united; never before had they had so gallant and so

wise a leader as Tyrone, a gentleman schooled at the same court as Essex and a graver man than he.

To-night there was a great assembly at the castle; already from all quarters of the city those who had any titles of authority, on foot or on horseback, were crowding towards it, eager to see the great earl.

The centre of Ireland's fate to-night was the castle: the centre of the castle, the unseen point from which depended all that was visible and seen, was the hidden heart of Essex. What wonder was it then that the crowd hurried so to look upon him?

As the coach lumbered heavily up Castle Street and the horses trod hollow on the drawbridge between the two round towers, Meraud's heart beat high.

"See, now, child," her father was saying. "These are dangerous times; see that you bear yourself discreetly. To be seen speaking to the noble Earl of Essex shall advance us greatly."

But Meraud did not listen at all to her father, for this, indeed, was her custom.

Within the castle shone a memorable pageant. The hall, one hundred feet in length and eighty in breadth, was lit by candles and torches, and filled with a great throng of figures that continually moved. A lane was kept clear up the middle, leading directly to the upper end of the hall where stood the Earl of Essex.

The eye was at once awed and enchanted that rested upon him; behind him was the dark wall and over him the dark roof; against this background his person blazed, an emblem of power shown forth in actual beauty of manhood and state.

From head to foot he was clothed in very rich white satin embroidered in pearls, with a short mantle of

white velvet upon one shoulder. A jewelled order hung on his breast, suspended by a ribbon of blue. His bearing was august, almost suggesting the sovereign, but crossed by sudden flashes of impatience or delight. The noble head was thrown a little back and the light, brightest in that part of the hall where he stood, showed the dark locks of hair, the beard lighter by many shades, the bright red lips, the well-formed features, and the high brow. On either hand of him shone a constellation of his officers, those next to him young and brilliant as himself, the greybeards further off.

Although Meraud, more than once, had had direct speech of him, she was awed in spite of her pride as she approached him.

Quitting her father's arm, she sank him a curtsey; then he, taking a full step forward, extended his hand and raised her up. Meraud looked into his face and met his flashing look.

"Ah, beautiful Mistress Meraud!" he said: "lovely shining emerald of maidens, I am conveyed straight to another world when I look on you. In truth," said he, lowering his voice and gazing earnestly upon her, "such beauty as yours is like a still pool to a troubled spirit. So exasperated as I am, with sage councillors and foolish counsels, I do long for nothing so much as some enchanted ship that would carry me with so fair a companion as you to some island of rest, where I might find that peace which honour ever denies me."

"Ah," said Meraud, gaily smiling and also speaking low, "I thought your lordship had had enough and too much of the sea of late. And did you indeed find such peace, where were your lordship's glories then?"

The eyes of Essex darkened and his face, that but a

moment before had been so victorious, became uneasy and perturbed.

"Truly, fair maiden," he said in still lower tones, gazing upon her radiant form and countenance and as if impelled to speak, "I fear me there is small augury of any glory coming to my house by way of this country. Did not my unhappy father lose here fortune and life?" And as he spoke, a black cloud rested on his brow for all men to behold, for the countenance of Essex showed always the open sign of his loves and hates, his hopes and fears, as plain as though a voice cried from behind his shoulder the feelings he fain would hide.

Seeing Essex with his eyes cast down upon the floor in the attitude of despondency, Sir Henry Cuffe stepped forward and touched him upon the arm. Essex started and flung off the warning hand as, in an instant recovering his customary look of gallant animation, he turned to those who continually pressed forward from the other end of the hall.

Meraud passed on and, at her father's bidding, took the arm of Sir Xylonides Bullen, a round-faced middle-aged gentleman with a cold, keen eye, reputed an able governor, known in those harsh days for his harshness.

"You have been highly honoured, Mistress Meraud," said he. "The noble earl spoke long with you. I see many eyes upon you and many are wondering of what he spoke so earnestly?"

But Meraud would give no heed; she was wild on the gaze. "Oh, what a day! what a night!" she cried. "Oh, but I am glad to be here. Was ever so much grandeur seen before?"

"It is in truth a splendid scene," said he: "and the noble earl, the sun or centre of the firmament of lesser

lights. Small wonder if all men's eyes follow him. He is fantastic in his humours of late, but it were something beside the ordinary if he spoke of aught particular in the very centre of this crowd?"

Meraud looked at him, and for all answer a strange slow smile that was not her own overspread her face: then of a sudden she cast down her eyes and fell to considering a mean leg in a handsome black stocking which she well recognised.

Sir Xylonides looked at her with fresh attention. Then he said:

"You are wise beyond your years, Mistress Meraud, for you will keep counsel." As the maiden still remained silent, gazing now around her as though searching for a face, he spoke on, while still regarding her.

"Look how bitterly Captain Anthony Falconer looks down into his beard; he likes not the complexion this expedition has put on; men say that the evil augury of this voyage is like to be fulfilled."

"I heard of none," said Meraud, her looks still seeking through the crowd, "save that the ships met with ill winds and were long at sea."

"Heard you not then how nearly was the queen's treasure lost? for when the ships were endeavouring to recover over the bar with all their sails up and full, the *Popinjay* and the *Charell*, that had all the treasure on board, made together, and were like to have dashed each other in pieces, and with much ado escaped one from the other. And also it is said that when the army marched out of London and the whole city was gone out to see them, such a thunderstorm burst upon all as has scarcely been experienced before, for the wonder of the lightning and the violence of the rain."

“That is strange,” said Meraud. “But my father has told me that so great an army or so much gold has never come into Ireland before, and that even Tyrone, himself, is no match for the Earl of Essex; so that out of this war we shall get peace at last.”

Sir Xylonides smiled upon her. “Heaven send peace, indeed, fair Mistress Meraud; we are long enough distracted; but this Essex from his boyhood was a queen’s darling, and I do not like the breed.”

While they spoke, Meraud’s eyes, that had ceaselessly roamed about the hall, now at last, like a travelling bird that sights her home, joyfully lighted on the face they sought.

Far back in the hall, leaning against an arch’s side, was Estercel.

Since ever she had seen him come riding down the street the whole desire of Meraud’s heart, strong and untamed, had been placed upon him. In her youth and pride Meraud had never doubted of happy love; all men told her she was beautiful; already she knew them for her subjects and practised consciously arts of subjugation till her more simple mother wondered at the once simple girl.

Now as her glance flew and rested upon Estercel standing in dark clothes at the back of the gaily-dressed crowd, there was a simplicity of delight in her face that transformed the stiff attire, the more calculated bearing, she had assumed. At the same moment his eyes lit upon her and either smiled.

Sir Xylonides saw the greeting which passed. “Fair lady,” he said, “I see plainly that you are in all the secrets. Now I would give ten crowns to know what is that young man’s business with the Earl of Essex,

and I would give twenty for that white horse he rides."

"You would not get him," said Meraud, laughing. "That white horse is father and mother to him, for neither has he."

"What does he do here, fair Meraud?"

"That I do not know," answered she.

"I will wager you two crowns," said Sir Xylonides, "that he will not tell you."

"I will take up the wager," said Meraud smiling from under her eyelids; for she said to herself, "Estercel will tell me if I ask him, but I will not tell you, old man."

"Let us go round the hall and you shall speak with him, mistress," said Sir Xylonides, and they began slowly to make their way.

"I will tell you what I think," said Sir Xylonides, speaking in a small bitter voice, the voice of the plotter, his mouth to her ear. "I believe this young man is a spy of Tyrone's. They say he sends lame men and blind men everywhere as his messengers, but he may well employ a piece of comeliness on such occasions as this. For this youth has had speech of Essex and the council, and men are now whispering that the army moves not against Tyrone; they will first destroy his allies in the south, forsooth; as though he that goes out to war with a lion should hunt jackals. I know how it comes about. Could I but find there had been parleying between Essex and Tyrone, I could make up a budget for the queen's majesty's ears which, God bless her, are always open for such. Who knows, fair mistress, but that fortune for us both may lie that way?"

He took Meraud by the arm as he spoke and drew her into a side doorway that opened on a vaulted passage.

A dank air moved up from it and it was black dark and chilling cold. The voice of the plotter, the same that spoke in the cathedral, was in her ears.

"See, Mistress Meraud," said he, pointing down: "George Arglass that hath the charge of this castle is my good friend, and many matters we have in hand together. It is but the word 'spy' in his ear and a few words from your lips, fair mistress, and we have a traitor by the heels."

Meraud turned and gazed into the black depth of the passage, then back into the bright hall whose floor was like a moving garden, whose roof was filled with the loud mingled murmur of many voices. Either seemed real: either seemed to make the other unreal. Often in her short life Meraud had looked upon fear and it had passed her by. To-night it took hold of her. Her strong and lovely face turned pale and she was shaken in the comfort of her beauty and youth. For the first time she knew that behind day comes the night; behind joy, sorrow; that behind beauty waits decay, and behind security wanders fear.

Her keen intelligence suddenly fathomed the depth of the plot against Essex. His friends, Blount and Southampton, excluded from the council through the queen's jealousy, which was easily manipulated to their own advantage by his enemies at home; the council, packed with his enemies, forcing him on the southern war, while Tyrone camped in the north. The same council aided by a hundred, ay, a thousand, false and bitter tongues whispering everywhere the rumour of Essex's traitorousness, because he secretly parleyed with the enemy—of his cowardice, because he dare not meet Tyrone.

Her heart was torn with pity for Essex so hedged about as he was with perfidiousness, one foot in a deadly trap: and she felt a great pang of fear lest Estercel should be caught also and destroyed by this terrible man.

Did Essex know his enemies? Did Estercel know his danger? She might warn them both, she thought.

But when they were got round to Estercel and stood face to face with him, being a maiden and young, she forgot the black passage and the jealous eyes of Sir Xylonides and felt only joy. Like old friends, they turned to each other and talked together; talked of the life each had known before they had come to town; of riding and the day's joy out hunting, of the lakes and the fishing, and much of the music that they both loved.

Then, "And where in the north is it you live?" asked Meraud.

"In the O'Neil's country," said he, "beyond the Yellow Ford."

"And perhaps you know Tyrone?" says she, smiling sly to herself.

"To my glory I do," says he, "for a great man he is. There is more strength and seriousness in him than in the Earl of Essex; although the outward appearance of my Lord Essex is grand indeed to-night; not but what Tyrone has very fine clothes of his own too. Well, indeed," he went on, "to-night I have seen a great sight that will last me my life; I am glad and sorry at the one time to be going back to my own country to-morrow."

"Going back to-morrow? To-morrow, oh, no!" said Meraud, and her voice had a new note. Estercel

looked upon her, saw her pale face and the tears springing to her shining eyes, and in part he loved her. Looking round to see if they were observed, he laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"And will you come back with me," said he, laughing to her, "on the back of Tamburlaine?"

Meraud forgot the kincob gown and her dignity together. She could not bear to lose her great shining Estercel. She turned herself to him, and if they had been alone she would have cast her arms about his neck. "Oh, I will come with you," she cried. "Oh, that would be the joy, to ride together!"

Then Estercel remembered himself, for upon his finger he saw a slender ring of twisted gold. He took away his hand. "I ask your pardon, Meraud Fitz-Pierce," he said, and to his face came the sudden colour of regret and shame. "I ought not to have asked you any such thing. I have given my promise to another girl, and if I should ride home with you behind me, what would she say to me then?"

Have you seen a galloping horse brought up on a sudden by a powerful rider? Have you seen the rearing, the indignant mouth, the wild eye, the panting nostril? Even so was Meraud checked; all this for one moment Estercel saw, and recognised his fatal mistake.

The next minute the maiden had turned her face away and stepped to meet her father who hurried towards her, saying:

"Come, Meraud, child, where have you hidden yourself? His lordship asks for you?"

In a kind of forlorn regret Estercel watched her go, as a child's eyes will follow a departing light or a hand that takes a rose away. He had heard her father's

words and in going she appeared so splendid in her golden gown that almost it seemed to him as if she were chosen to take the shining path to honour, while his lay out in the dark. Then he went out and left the castle.

Involuntarily as he went along he turned the ring on his finger. Clear as in the moonlight of their last meeting he saw the brown Sabia, her tender face looking upon him, and he was consoled for the loss of bright Meraud. He little knew that he had better have roused the wild bull on the mountain than to have so affronted this beauty, whose double nature, apt to good as well as evil, rendered her doubly dangerous.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ABBESS INTERFERES

THAT night when Meraud at last found herself alone in her chamber, the vacant sense of newly-won triumphs left her and the deeps of her heart came up. Till but a few weeks ago she had been fancy free; then her fancy in all its wildness had lit upon Estercel. Ardent and strong, fanned by strange winds, the flame burned in her; how was it with her now?

In a dead pause she waited, questioning her own heart. Now and then a foot sounded in the passageway or on the stairs passing to the upper chambers of the house. From the street, voices of those that went home now and then reached her lattice.

Idly she rose and went to the mirror; idly she looked at her own likeness there.

Suddenly, coming from whence she knew not, hate, like an arrow, passed into her heart. So great a passion of rage at the insult she had received seized upon her that she was convulsed. With swelling bosom, out-straining arms, and clenched hands she stepped a pace backwards on the floor, while through her closed teeth came indistinctly such words as she had never before uttered, the dangerous language of hate.

Before her passion had exhausted itself, her unseeing eyes, that looked beyond the mirror at the object of her anger, on a sudden, saw. Her own face in the mirror was distorted and grown strange to her; for one second

it seemed to her the likeness of the face she had seen before setting out.

Grown cold, she turned away, and sitting on her bedside began to think. Neither love nor hate are sufficient to themselves. As love seeks to render a golden service, so hate must yield her service too, the poisonous service of revenge.

Meraud's pride was great, her nature high and tyrannous. She had received her first insult, and she would destroy the man who had insulted her. With that determination she unlaced the golden gown, and presently lay down upon her bed and slept.

With the early morning she was up again, following the impulse which had survived, even gained strength in her sleep.

A few words written with much labour on a piece of parchment from her father's cabinet sufficed, and a quick messenger sent from the house in haste.

Late the same evening a packet was brought to her.

Receiving it from the hand of the man that brought it, Meraud retired from the noisy hall to the quiet of her own chamber, where she opened it. Two silver crowns fell into her lap; paying no heed to them, she read the writing:

“MOST FAIR MISTRESS,—Most fairly have you won the wager. Our friend we spoke of lies safe in the castle or, as I might more truly say, under the castle. He hath suffered a rap upon the pate; Heaven mend him soon; for George Arglass advises that we do apply some sort of persuasion to speech. If this matter be shrewdly pushed, fortune may be found to lie behind it; small bolts

will sometimes bring down mighty great birds.—In haste, fair mistress, I remain, your devoted servant,
“XYLONIDES BULLEN.”

When Meraud had succeeded in spelling out her letter, with an unmoved countenance she folded it and tucked it in the bosom of her dress. Downstairs she went again to join in the common life of the hall and parlour where there was noise and laughter and coming and going.

Although it was the month of May, the day was cold and cloudy, and the windows of the houses were now and again buffeted by drenching storms of rain.

Towards afternoon a trembling seized upon the limbs of Meraud. How did she know but that they might be torturing him now? She rose from her place and went slowly up the stairs to her room. On the threshold she paused. The chamber was filled with a greenish light from the lattice upon which the rain beat. It seemed to her as though there was, or had been, some presence in the room. With a fainting heart, Meraud crossed the floor: sidelong she glanced at the mirror which she had learned to fear; it seemed to her that a formless shadow swept across its depths.

Turning her face away, she moved to the bedside and sank upon her knees.

Not many minutes elapsed before the abbess entered the room and, approaching the kneeling girl, sat down upon the bedside and took her cold hand in hers.

“What ails you, daughter?” she said.

Meraud answered no word but turned and laid down her shining head upon the abbess’s white knees, sighing as she did so with a pitiful sound.

The abbess felt her powerless hands and her damp

forehead; then crossed herself many times and murmured a prayer while she gazed about her and round the chamber so filled with the air, the very perfume of vanity.

Meraud's beauty and demeanour had brought her many lovers, for the city was full of gentlemen; and these had given her gifts; draperies and kerchiefs and perfumes and buckled shoes and little toys, and there was no order in the room at all.

"What ails you, daughter?" asked the abbess again, and again came no answer,¹ but only the pitiful sighs.

"It is even as I feared," murmured the holy woman. "This is no bodily illness. The maiden is bewitched and will die."

Herself now paler even than ordinary with fear, the abbess turned her eyes sideways upon the mirror. The rain streamed upon the lattice and the shimmering greenish light moved within the glass.

"The mirror is accursed," said the abbess.

Rising with determination, she unclasped the girl's hands from her knees and endeavoured to raise her so as to place her on the bed, but Meraud, still kneeling, cast her arms over the coverlet and buried her face in it.

The abbess made the sign of the cross over the girl's head; then with a great boldness went and faced the mirror. The light flickered in it, and her loathing for it as an evil thing grew upon her as she gazed. Lifting it in her arms, as it swung on a double chain, she looked between it and the wall.

"*Spiritus Sanctus, adjuva me!*" she murmured, as turning she hurried from the room. In a moment she came back carrying a huge brass-bound book of prayers.

Raising it high in the air, she dashed the heavy clasp against the glass.

Meraud started at the crash: she looked up and saw the splintered glass flying, then buried her face in the coverlet as before. But when, in another moment, she felt a hand laid upon her head, as though the breaking of the mirror had loosed her spirit she raised herself and, throwing her arms across the abbess's knees, burst into weeping and bemoaned herself most bitterly.

"What ails you, child? What ails you?" said the abbess anxiously, feeling her stricken state.

Meraud ceased her weeping, drew forth from her bosom both money and letter, and put them into the abbess's hands.

"I have given a man's life for two crowns," she said, and putting down her head again she resumed her weeping.

The abbess, once used to authority, had long skill in reading people's faces and much activity in inquiring into their affairs: she loved Meraud, and because she had carefully watched her and because she had in her zeal contrived to peruse the letter before Meraud had received it, she needed but to ask a question or two and the whole matter was clear to her.

Her pale face became lit with a holy fervour; her hands hovered over the head of the weeping girl.

"You have done an evil deed, child," she said.

"I have indeed!" cried Meraud. "I am undone. Oh, Mother of God, in the black dark they will have put him. They will be torturing him even now. The saints forgive me, but surely I was mad."

"Worse than mad, daughter—" said the holy woman, "bewitched! and for the time the child of the devil.

Look round at the room, Meraud; it is the chamber of a wanton. Not another night do you sleep here till it has been cleansed; the spirit of that woman lingers here and has overcome yours."

"But the evil is done, reverend mother; they will show him no mercy; ah, what can I do? Take me away to some convent, reverend mother and aunt, for I will go into the world no more."

The abbess made no answer for a long while; still the girl wept on in anguish and the heavy rain beat on the latticed window.

At length she spoke.

"Daughter," she said, "lift up your head and listen to what I shall say."

In the midst of her weeping Meraud lifted up her head, her face was pale as death. The white lids of her eyes were swollen and down her cheeks ran rivers of tears.

"Daughter," said the holy woman, "those tears are blessed; for long enough you have shown me the face of pride. And of late I have feared my prayers were unacceptable for it was the face of a wanton as well. But now, daughter, that you have repented, did you but will it, your body, which is of itself but vileness, might be as the throne of an angel. Did you but accept of heaven's grace, your carnal beauty, which is even now more powerful than ten swords, might be as an arrow in the hand of the Almighty. I will bring holy water and sprinkle your jewels and your fine clothes and your slippers and your pots of unguent, that all may be used in His service. I have heard much of you of late, and it is borne in upon my mind that you are intended for greatness. Come, daughter, rise up and leave your weeping. We must find means to liberate this young

man, if it be possible, under God. Come away from this chamber; you shall stay no longer here."

Slowly Meraud rose up, a faint life stirring in her sick heart.

In her going, she paused on the threshold of the room that she was not to enter again till it was wholly purified and cleansed. She looked at the broken mirror and the glass that lay in fragments on the floor; memory showed her a picture of her own countenance as she had seen herself therein only the night before. She saw the red cheek and lips, the crown of shining hair, the golden crown. Now like the glass her pride was shattered, and she turned away, loathing her sin.

"I know not what to do," said she, with meek voice and countenance, "nor how to save him!"

CHAPTER XV

THE HORSE THIEF

OWEN JOY, his head wrapped in a mantle, his heart beating under its folds, roamed the corn market, avoiding the pale light of the half moon that shone on the centre booths. On his feet were silent shoes of supple cow-hide. He was looking for a man and horse, either of them the beauty of the world to him. The city gates were fast shut, the three clocks answered each other, one chiming from the castle, one from the tholsel, one from the cathedral. So worn was he by grief and panic fear that as each new chime fell upon his ear his heart leaped like a deer's.

Three days now since a message had come for Estercel, brought by a man in the livery of the FitzPierces; three days since Estercel had mounted his horse and ridden away out of the Dame Gate, and along Dame's Lane, when man and horse alike had disappeared. Owen Joy and his men had scarce slept since then. Like madmen they wandered the streets, keeping their madness secret, dreading the wild bands of soldiers they must be continually meeting. By day they had explored north, south, east, and west of the city boundaries, and but one trace had Owen Joy come upon. Three men lay sick in a hut half a mile beyond St. Andrew's Church, an old woman nursing them; she told one of Joy's men they had got their broken bones from a great white horse that was more fiend than horse. That was all the old woman could say; the men were very bad, near death indeed.

Therefore Owen explored all that neighbourhood more particularly; not an outhouse or a dirty stable but he had peered into it, often at the risk of his life.

Now the watch came up past Hanging Tower crying the hour; he dodged into a doorway, then turned up Back Lane. Half way up a noise struck upon his ear, the noise of iron upon wood and stone.

Owen Joy's heart leapt again; his mantle fell from about his face, as he craned forward to listen. The noise had ceased. There was silence, broken only by the baying of dogs and the crying of some woman far away. Owen went forward: a turn to the left into an ill-smelling alley brought him presently to a door in a high wall that stood across the way. From the other side of the wall came the thundering noise again.

"No horse in the world could make that noise but himself," said Owen Joy, and he sprang like a cat on the door. It was bolted on the inside, but there was a round hole over the lock. Owen Joy put his hand through and grasped about for a bolt inside; as he did so, he felt a horrid tingling in all his fingers and up his arm: who knew but a sword cut might come down upon it from the other side? After some fumbling he found a wooden bar; it was heavy and rattled in the stanchions as he pulled on it. Softly and steadily he drew it back and the door gave. Owen waited a moment; then slipped inside and closed it, shutting himself in.

He was standing in a yard round which were the closed doors of stables. In the middle of the yard the moonlight shone. Owen drew into the shadow; he whistled low and soft, making a sound like a distant owl-note. It was answered by the whinny of a horse from a stable near at hand.

"It's himself," said Owen; at the sound of his voice there was a mighty thundering of hoofs; it was difficult to believe that one beast, however great, made such a noise; not four, but thirty-two hoofs, you would have said were in it. As Owen watched, he saw splinters dashed from the stable door across the moonlight. He slipped along in the shadow and whispered at the door.

"Horse of my heart, is it you?"

A piercing neigh answered him.

"Be still then, son of my soul: look under the door, I will pass my hand to you."

The hand was slipped under and the horse's great tongue licked it over and over again while he snuffled and whinnied with a sound like weeping.

Owen drew his hand away; he stood up and examined the door. It was bolted on the outside and secured with a huge padlock.

"Keep up your heart, my son. Somehow or other I'll come to you," he whispered. He examined the lock; almost he could get his finger into the keyhole, but not quite. He drew out his sheath-knife and fitted it in; one strong turn and the lock shot back. Cautiously he opened the door and passed inside, closing it again; seeking out the shadow of the great beast in the darkness, he threw his arms about his neck. Man and horse communed together in sighs and moanings, weeping for the sake of him that was not there.

Owen opened the door a little way that the moonlight might come in. Tamburlaine was in a fearful state; his white hide was sullied and stiff with sweat; his hocks were running with blood, his eyeballs red and nostrils too. Owen took off the neck-cloth that he wore and mopped head and neck, while the creature

gratefully tossed and exulted in the touch of love, the familiar thing. That done, Owen stuck his hands through his hair and thought in a whisper aloud.

"My soul to glory but I know not what to do with you! Oh, that I could reduce this elephant to the dimensions of a mouse and put him in my pocket. Can I take him up a wooden stairs to a loft in the inn of the Black Dog, and hide him there in a place shared by seven other men? Nay. Can I conduct him through the streets unseen, when the trampling of him is like the marching of an army? Past midnight and I must have him away before morning."

Throwing his arm along the horse's neck, he rested his forehead upon him and continued his thought in silence. Raising himself up at last, he said:

"Listen to me, well beloved; I am going now; but I will return again. Keep up your heart and practise patience. I will know no rest till I have liberated you and him that we adore and restored you to the hills of the north."

Tamburlaine turned his rolling eyes upon Owen Joy. With ears pricked forward he hearkened to every word.

As the tree turns to the light, holding up its flowing branches in the warm sun, understanding the music of the wind and the rain, and without eyes beholding the beauty of the earth; as the infant understands the speech of the mother, before knowing the meaning of her words, so did the horse understand the speech of the man whose language had been to him ever that of a friend.

"Therefore, lie down, my son," said Owen, "and wait patiently till I come back," and he laid his hand upon Tamburlaine's forehead lock.

The horse bent his knees; Owen moved to the door;

in the dim light he saw the whole great bulk sink peacefully to the ground; softly he closed the door, and swift and silent as a cat sped on his way. As he ran in the shadow, glancing from left to right, his beard on his shoulder, he thought and he planned.

Coming to the yard of the Black Dog Inn where he and his fellows had a corner of a loft (and thankful to get it, so crowded was the town), Owen Joy opened the stable doors each in turn and looked within: every stall was occupied. The uneasy stir of the horses woke the sleepers above and a head was thrust out.

"All right," said Owen. "It's only myself. I'm away to my bed."

The head withdrew grumbling and Owen climbed the ladder to his loft. Picking his way among the sleeping forms, he threw himself down at last beside Black Maurice, the trustiest of his men.

Quiet he lay for a few minutes while his mind flew hither and thither reviewing many places and things, fixing on one after another as suitable to his purpose.

Black Maurice—should he take him? No, for two men could scarce escape the watch. Should he tell him? Aye: for if he went down, Maurice might carry out his plan. His old cloak? that was covering Michael; his knife? that was in his belt. In the dark he drew the mantle off the limbs of the sleeping Michael and unsheathing his knife cut and ripped the cloth till he had it in four pieces. The can of ruadan, the lump of yellow ochre, where had he seen them? Below in the outer kitchen of the inn, certainly. That dark alley, that great wall, that tall house, what place was it next or nigh?

Now he remembered: that other tall house beyond

was Lord Clancarty's. Now his plans were made. Rolling over, he laid hold of Black Maurice, and whispered in his ear.

"Whist, will you? Wake, you snoring devil, and tell me where will I get a ball of twine?"

"Holy Virgin!" gasped Maurice in his bewilderment.

"Owen, my friend, can it be that you are drunk?"

"Listen, Maurice," said Owen, and putting his lips close to the other's ear, he whispered long and with less noise than a mouse would make in his corner. Much he said and ended with: "Now, where will I get a piece of twine?"

"Oh, glory, glory, wisha, wisha!" said Maurice. "I seen a good hank in Alexander's waist-belt," and crawling on his hands and knees and ejaculating all the way, he came to his companion and, cleverly rummaging him over, extracted at last the hank of string from somewhere about his person.

Who so swift then as Owen? Down the ladder he went like a cat and in at the inn back door. Two servant maids lay asleep in the back kitchen. Creeping softly he snatched the can and brush and the lump of ochre and, hiding all under his cloak, set out at a sliding trot back the way he had come. At the entrance to the dark alley he paused, laid down his bundle and can in a dark corner, and turned aside, taking to another lane. Here, for awhile, he lost his bearings, for a knot of quarrelling soldiers came hurling out of a house and sent him off down another alley. At last, as the clocks struck the half hour after one, he reached the great house of the Clancartys. Stealing along by the wall he came to the stables. The gates were locked but the small man-door was open. Entering, he crept along and laid his

ear to each door in turn and in each he seemed to distinguish the breathing of a horse. Despair filled him; he went the round again; one door led to the biggest stable which had six stalls, he knew; he listened and heard the stir and the munching of more horses than two or three. Still there might be one empty stall. Softly he pushed back the bolt, and, as he did so, a head was thrust out from a loft.

"Who's that and what are ye after?"

"Haven't I been," said Owen, in sulky accents, "sent up from Lisadill with a horse for his lordship? and three mortal hours I've been looking for Clancarty House, and my man below there is lost standing in the street with a led horse and nowhere to put him."

"I've heard tell of no horse coming for his lordship."

"It's a gift horse and a mighty particular one. I'm to see her ladyship in the morning about it," said Owen.

"Well, well, there's a small box on the right of the stalls that's vacant. Put him in there till the morning. Maybe I had better come down."

"Don't trouble yourself, O steward of the Clancartys," said Owen. "I'll just have one look at the box and then I'll go fetch the horse. And may I lie down beside him till the morning?"

"Well, and I suppose you may unless, as you seem a well-spoken man, you would wish to come up and share a place."

"Don't trouble yourself, sir," said Owen, "thanking you all the same. In about half an hour's time, if you hear the walk of a horse, that will be me and himself. A great beast it is, and a great tramp he makes." And with that Owen disappeared into the stable. Presently he came out again and whistled till the head

appeared in the upper window frame. "What can I do about the gates?" said Owen. "You can't bring a horse through a man-hole."

The man above rubbed his head perplexed. "It is a great pity that my sleep should be disturbed in this way. And I not at all well in myself this week past. I sorely need all I can get," he said at length in a stifled whisper.

"Do not be troubled," said Owen in the same voice, "leave it all to me. Suffer me to keep one side of the gate unbarred for a short half hour; after I have placed the horse in the stall I will bar it again before I lie down."

The gate ajar behind him, Owen sped forth like an arrow from a bow. A lean strong runner, he bounded noiselessly at a greyhound's pace till he came to the alley where he had left his bundle and can. A stray dog was smelling them who started aside as Owen came up to him with a yelp that set all the other dogs around howling. Owen sank on the ground in the dark corner, his head on his hand, planning his way. The noise of the dogs died away; the stillness became complete; it was the dead hour of night. The moon was now descending the sky, and soon her light would be quenched. A wet touch on his hand made him start; there was the stray dog again who leaped backwards a yard when Owen lifted his head. He held out his hand and the dog came and sniffed upon it. Owen felt in his pocket for a piece of stale bread and, breaking it in half, gave a piece to the dog who ate it ravenously. Presently it came close and timidly lay down beside him. Owen put his hand on its head and something of the love and sorrow and longing that was in the man's heart reached the dog's.

At last Owen rose up and took the bundle of cloth, and pointing to the can he whispered to the dog, " Watch it," and then stole away.

Coming to the gate, he found it bolted on the inside when he had left it merely closed. Owen was worn with grief and watching; a brave man, he was seized with unreasoning terror. That part of him which he could not control told him that on the other side of the gate death waited for him. Owen had faced ten foes at once in battle; he felt he would rather face them again than thrust his arm through that hole.

It must be done; he bared his arm to the shoulder, measured his distance on the hither side of the door, then with a wonderfully rapid and silent movement shot back the bolt and withdrew his arm. As he did so he heard a movement in the yard. There was some one behind the door.

Owen laid his ear to the crack. He was not a hunter for nothing; his ear soon told him all that his eye wished to know. A large dog lay crouched there panting hard and ready to spring. Owen smiled; he pulled off his cloak and wound it round his left arm; he drew his long knife from his belt, no need to feel the edge, for he knew its sharpness; collecting all his force till the whole of him was strung like a bent bow, he pushed the door with his foot and sprang into the yard. The bloodhound leaped; Owen thrust his left arm in his throat and drove his long knife between his ribs. In that one silent moment of strife a noble dog was dead.

Now for the man who had loosed him. Owen lifted the dead body that was as heavy as a calf into the dark corner of the wall, drew out the knife and wiped it on the dog's hide; then he stood in the shadow, listening,

motionless as a statue, till the clock struck two. Whoever it was that loosed the dog must have gone back to his rest.

There was no sound in the yard save the occasional stirring of the horses. But in all that time there was no sound from Tamburlaine's stall and Owen's heart was heavy in his breast. Was he gone? or was he dead, that he knew not when Owen was by?

Waiting a few moments till the last vibration of the striking clocks had died upon the air, Owen crept to the stable door. His spirit rose, for it was as he had left it; the lock closed, but not fastened. He slipped within; there lay the great white beast calmly asleep, as Owen could see from the heaving of his sides.

"Ah, poor fellow, poor fellow," murmured Owen. "He was worn out with sorrow. His heart was at rest once he had talked to me."

He bent down and whispered: "Wake, beloved; wake, but lie still." The large eye opened; the horse had dreamed of Estercel and woke to look upon Owen.

With rapid movements the bundle was now unrolled; taking one of the four pieces of cloth Owen began to muffle a hoof, padding it with straw and binding it with string around the pastern, neat and tight. Tamburlaine raised himself on his shoulder that he might look on; he had been muffled before and understood there was need of silence. Soon the four feet were trimmed and ready and, "Rise, good horse," said Owen and stood off from him with circumspection. Tamburlaine got upon his fore hoofs, raising up the hinder part of his body afterwards, without lashing or struggling; then standing upright he laid his chin on the shoulder of Owen in token of affection and obedience.

Owen opened the door and looked out: all was empty and silent; he crossed the yard and opened the door. Tamburlaine had followed of his own accord, stepping like a shadow on his muffled feet. Owen went back and shut the stable door, then the yard door. Softly as they went, still he thought he heard a sound somewhere behind him. He sped up the alley, the horse after him, till he came to where the can was, the dog watching it. He snatched it up, then leaped on the horse's back. "Trot soft, boy," he whispered. The great horse put himself in motion; the dog following behind; Owen guided him, as he had often done before, with a hand on his neck.

There is something strange in the tread of muffled hoofs, something ominous in the sound, not quite natural. To Owen the beat of Tamburlaine's feet was as loud as thunder and his own heart beat almost as loud.

So near a half safety; yet he was sure that he was followed, that danger was behind. Three-quarters of the way along Back Lane was a timber yard, just before the turning into Nicholas Street. Arrived opposite, Owen slipped from the horse's back and ran before him through the timber to a low pile at the back of the yard.

"Down!" he said to horse and dog, and in a moment all three lay crouched together. The hind-quarters of Tamburlaine stuck out and shone in the moonlight. Owen took off his cloak and spread it over them. The horse turned his head to look and Owen could have sworn he laughed.

For full five minutes they lay hidden, then two men came running round the corner; they stopped on seeing the timber, stood still, and listened. One of them, a tall man in leather jacket and breeches, with a reddish

head and a big nose that shone in the moonlight, came forward and looked behind the nearest stack. The hair on the neck of Tamburlaine stiffened and his sweat broke out under Owen's hand. He began to move and stir himself, when suddenly the little dog, who had been lying quiet as a mouse, rushed forward barking. Owen felt as though his heart would burst at the noise, but it was well for him in the end; the men kicked the dog aside and, thinking it belonged to the yard, went on. Owen waited till the sound of their feet died away as they went past Clancarty House. Crossing and blessing himself he arose and, with the horse at his heels, ran soft and cautious along Back Lane and round the turn into Nicholas Street; all was empty and silent. Without waiting a moment he turned in at the gate, Tamburlaine following; he dared not remove the muffles outside. Deep thankfulness was in his heart as he let down the iron bar on the inside and let Tamburlaine into the empty stall. Once there, he turned about, laid his arms on the horse's neck, and broke into a sob and more than one; for his heart was very sore within him as he thought of Estercel.

Then he pulled himself together, went out, fetched water, and worked hard as dyer and painter for the rest of the night. By morning it was a chestnut horse and not a white one that stood in the stall.

"It's the queerest colour of a chestnut ever I beheld," said Owen as he regarded his work in the morning light. "God send the weather may not wash away the ochre and leave him only the good sea-weed dye; for what man has ever beheld a pink horse from the beginning of the world up till now? A strawberry roan is what I'll call him from this out."

CHAPTER XVI

ESSEX AND HIS COUNCIL

OUT of doors in the sweet May weather there was liberty and delight. The morning wind blew fresh from the sea; grey clouds travelled fast across, turning and rolling and changing their shapes. Below in the sea fish darted and swam in their silver armour, some coasting the shallows, some making straight out for the broad water, some returning to the sands, but all pleased and happy in the young light of day.

Above in the air the grey-spotted crows turned somersaults from pure glee. Loudly and hoarsely they talked to each other as they amused themselves about the walls of the castle, those old walls, four square and of incredible thickness, nigh four hundred years old. The crows were well amused; they could do as they liked, say what they liked, and go where they liked. One flew up in the air, and coming down on a round ball of a thing that stuck on a pole, took a bite out of a patriot's head. A couple flew up the town, and descending on their favourite stable-yard sat by to see Owen Joy washing his hands and arms at the stable well, with a made-up face and the ready lies tripping off his tongue. Then up and away with them a hundred miles across the wind to the corn haggards of the north where there were still pickings to be had, and where the ploughs still kept the field, though now long rusted in the south.

Fair and green every inch of the way, the creatures of the leafy kingdoms rose up to meet sun and rain. In peace and freedom they grew, and stretched up their stalks and branches, tossing and nodding in the free wind. Very simple their lives and simple their destinies; how full of folly and terror beside them were the difficult destinies of the men that trod them down. From sea to sea there was unrest and misery among the races of men. The ancient inhabitants panting with rage and fear, looking on their beloved meadows and their herds that would soon be snatched from them. The soldiers of the camp, slaves to the officers, herded like wolves, to be loosed like wolves to savage ends and brutish deeds, in obedience to the inevitable necessity that was at the heels of them all.

And at the heels of them all there was no sterner necessity than that which dogged the greatest man among them.

Look down, now, as the sun mounts higher, into the council chamber within the castle walls: see the long dark table with the stools set round; the high-backed chair with the cloth of estate at the head of the table set for the great earl. Watch the conspiring faces of the councillors as they come in by twos and threes; watch their faces as they stand by the windows; the more careless and unconcerned they look the deeper are they in the plot. These put it about in unconcerned fashion that they who wish to stand well with Robert Cecil will favour an expedition in the south. Just a hint and no more—a straw thrown up to show which way the wind most benign to their fortunes is blowing.

There is enough of talking and jesting; good stories are told. Now come in the Lords Justices Loftus and

Gardiner, in their scarlet robes. With them comes the squire of Cockington in Devon, Sir George Carey, the new Treasurer at War. A big lusty man, with an air of good humour; a born calculator behind that merry eye. Already he is revolving how to make his own profit out of this campaign; soon he will come to his great idea of collecting sacks full of the worthless leather tokens that are passed as money on the people of Ireland and forcing his sovereign mistress to relieve him of the said sacks at their full money value. But no man is more alive than he to the corruptions of the captains and the cheats put on her majesty by the army chiefs. Look at that bald-headed lawyer that has him now by the lace of his doublet, while he bends a willing ear.

“Hearken here, my Lord Treasurer, pay no moneys to the captains on account of their companies, for they will have their profit of it; let your clerks see instead that each man has his pack, in especial two good shirts, a strong sheet and blanket; better let them want a blue coat than go without a shift. I tell you that in this country I have known her majesty’s soldiers forced to wear the same clothes for three months without a change, sleeping on the bare ground, so that they are ragged and diseased, and we say that they are shadows not men. Small wonder that they are unfit for her majesty’s occasions.”

There is quite another sort of talk where the men of war are gathered together at another end of the apartment. Chief among them is Sir Warham Sentleger, like the war-horse always ready for battle, who has with difficulty been brought into the plot and only consents through jealousy of Essex. Listen to him now.

“Good company?” says he. “In faith there is little of it to be had in the south; you will find rogues and bastards out of England putting on the great gentleman.”

“Aye,” says Sir Anthony Standen, “and they are so imperious that every gentleman would be in commission of the peace. One of Waterford, a great swearer, they call him Justice God’s Wounds; another killing of Irish cows and selling hides and tallow, they call him Justice Tripes; another hunting, hawking, gaming, and coming but once a year, they call him Justice When-ye-will.”

There was a stir caused by the entrance of the Earl of Ormond, a noble and powerful old man in a splendid dress, he that was to be captured that very summer by McRory’s men, and dragged about from house to house and from cabin to cabin in a long and bitter captivity while his wife and much beloved daughter made vain efforts to relieve him.

By the end window Sir Edward Moore had button-holed Lord Justice Gardiner; it was noticeable that the talk of all these men was of the south, of the people they were likely to come into contact or collision with.

“The said Patrick,” Sir Edward was saying, “is in his bloom and flourishing there not thirty miles from Cork. This Patrick, a foul great lubber, was born when his mother was but eleven years old. He being beyond measure contumacious was brought as a prisoner to the Castle of Limerick, where he became, in dishonest sort, too familiar with the keeper’s wife and by her means made an escape. But she with her husband was recompensed for it shortly after, for they both lovingly hanged together! Ha! ha! ha! In a while after this Patrick was taken again and brought to the Castle of Dublin.

Sir William Fitzwilliam, being Lord Deputy, had his hands oiled with the oil of the angels and away goeth Patrick. Ha! ha! ha!"

"The oil of the angels!" laughed the Lord Justice. "May fortune send us each and all a moiety of that blessing; there is naught like it for promoting fellowship and all the loving Christian virtues!"

At this moment a shout was heard in the corridor, followed by the sound of an approaching hum of voices. The door of the council chamber is flung wide; with gorgeously-clad officials walking backwards before him, the Earl Marshal of England and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland makes his entry.

There is an instant commotion and breaking up of groups; so great an effect has the outward circumstance and show of authority that scarce one of the conspirators but feared in his heart that the attempt to overthrow so great a man and so gallant a soldier would be vain. Elizabeth still loved him, and her presence seemed to preside where he was. This was the deciding moment of his fate as he faced the council, practically alone.

If the man himself had been resolute; if the strength of his heart had corresponded with the strength of his position, he would have forced their hands, taken his own course, and triumphed.

But even as he entered, he was torn by useless passion, and there it was written black upon his brows.

Where were his friends Blount and Southampton? Thrown out of the council through the machinations of his enemies at home, an intolerable affront, which now, as he faced the room, he realised to the full. Moreover, so sensitive was the nature of Essex (having,

as we have said before, in a manner the gift of second sight) that the air of the council chamber affected him unpleasantly; it seemed to him as it were charged with some inimical element.

He was soon to realise the nature of the opposition that he was to meet, which was far other than he expected. Very smooth and suave are the salutations of those that greet him, some of them are even uneasy, for a great man may yet break loose and confound his enemies.

Prayers once over, down sits Essex in his chair, the councillors upon their stools, and business begins. Then it is:

"Nay, but, my lord, your lordship's grace does not know the country."

"Pardon us, my lord, but to march against Tyrone at this season of the year were madness! There is no grass for the horses; there is no corn in Ulster; or if there is, that desperate rebel will burn all before him."

"We have no beeves in store, my lord, without which the army cannot march." (Oh, traitors, what of the two hundred thousand milch kine of Ulster and its three times as many barren cattle?)

"Let this season pass, my lord, till the new grass be grown."

"Hearken to this, excellency; the troops are weak from the diseases of winter. Wait till their health grows sounder with the summer months."

"Nay, my lord, the rebels be now proud in insurrection, confident of your coming, and all prepared. It were better to make an expedition into the warmer south; one blow driven home there will strike terror

into the north, and you will come upon them then of a sudden and take them unprepared."

"To me it seems," said Essex, "that boldness and the straight course are the soldiers' virtues. An army is sent to you to chastise this Lucifer of the north, and you would turn it against the south."

And again it was:

"Your pardon, excellency, but your grace has no knowledge of the people or the country. These Irish wars are peculiar; they are not to be conducted like wars abroad."

This for three hours; till Essex, chafed, gloomy, angry, was overborne.

See him in his chair, tied by invisible cords, menaced by invisible hands, threatened by unseen weapons, driven upon fate! See him after the breaking up of the council, alone in his closet, with Sir Henry Cuffe, that hot and ill-fated councillor of a hot, ill-fated man. As the felt apprehension of his true position is borne in upon him he strides up and down in the narrow space; Sir Henry Cuffe sits on a stool in the corner, his hands clenched upon his knees, his back against the stone wall that is hung with embroidered silk, through which can be felt the roughness and cold of the stone, like the hard lot of Essex that grips him beneath the semblance of majesty. From beyond the curtained doorway comes the loud buzzing talk from the two-score of gentlemen that pack the bed-chamber. Under covert of murmurs the talk between the earl and Cuffe is carried on. Who knows what ear is at the curtain?

Presently the earl stands by the side of his faithful servant and looks down at him. "I have a sure pre-sage of coming misfortune, Cuffe," says he. "I doubt I

am undone. My enemies have it their own way, for my back is broken at home."

"A blast seize Robert Cecil," said Cuffe, the tears of rage pouring out of his eyes. "Fly him, I say. A poisonous great spider with his webs and his plots. They are about something and I cannot rightly make out what."

"There is more in this than appears. I doubt the air of this island is unwholesome for my family," said Essex. "Here it was my good father lost his fortune and his life at the hands of Leicester's poisoners; I doubt but my enemies have it now in mind here also to make an end of me."

A heavy silence fills the narrow closet in strange contrast to the loud roar of talk in the bed-chamber.

Who now would be the great man as he stands there, striving to read in the half-closed book of his fate? What prisoner more helpless than he?

Ay, but near enough for their worships to be incommoded by certain foul smells is the castle prison, called the Grate. There in a stone room half dark, lit only by a narrow spick or slit window, hangs the tall figure of a powerful young man, suspended by his broken bleeding thumbs. His head is fallen forward on his chest, his face ghastly pale is convulsed, while from his forehead run down drops of sweat that fall on the floor. Beside him stand two men, laughing, who with sharp-pointed staves prick him till he swings and spins.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WRITTEN WORD

IN the early morning light, Meraud sat up in her bed, her arms about her knees. She was newly awake from a strange dream.

Some obscure infection must have lingered in her blood, for though the mirror was gone, her dream had been of it. She thought she wished to look into a round whitish pool and always, as she came near, the pool fled further away. Under the glassy face of it was a mist and something moved in the mist that she ardently desired to catch a sight of. It was brightly coloured, she saw, but the shape she could not see. So she followed and followed and of a sudden the pool raised itself up from the ground, and stood in her path, a circle of mist, and out of its depths there dashed in that instant a terrible golden apparition, ruddy-haired, fearful-faced. And the creature made at her with such violence as though it meant to destroy her, so that she screamed and woke, and found herself shaking on her bed with the dawn light coming in at the window. Her room had a cold pale look, like a person in penitence. Everything in it had been sprinkled with holy water, even the walls and the floors. All the shining silks and the pots of essence and the charming follies were put away in the big chests. On the wall was a faint round mark showing where the mirror had been; now in the midst of it hung the cross, the symbol of pain.

The only unchastened thing in the room was the

maiden herself, painted as she was in all the colour and splendour of youth; and not painted only, but wrought in that warm marble, in those magical flowing curves that laugh in the face of the preacher.

Neither was there any chastened spirit in her eyes; they burned with resentment of the varied pains of life. She raged as she sat there, holding her knees. She abhorred her aunt's governance. She hated the chill purity of her room, sanctimonious it seemed to her. Most of all she hated the gnawing pain at her heart. She could not get rid of it, night or day. It lay down with her and rose up with her. She was like one who had been stabbed not once, but twice, and in the same place; the wound was open and would not heal. Even as she sat there her face contracted and turned pale, her eyes closed, and she laid down her head on her knees; a spasm of anguish ran through her; she felt in the very marrow of her bones the tortures of Estercel.

The evening before Sir Xylonides Bullen had called at her father's house. Meraud had turned her back upon him and made to go upstairs to be out of his sight; but her father had bidden her return and, though she sat sullen, she had to hear him speak.

He began by paying her many compliments on her beauty, which Meraud disregarded, troubling herself no more than if he had been an old piece of furniture at her side that creaked through age. At that the man's malicious nature awoke in him; he took a strange-looking toy out of his pocket and began turning it about. Meraud could not but look on it, and the more she looked, the less she liked it; she glanced up at the face above it, then down again at the steel toy, and a shudder crept along her flesh.

He laughed. "You don't like it, pretty mistress? Can you guess what it is?"

"I cannot," said Meraud.

"Why, it is a gag for our comely friend. He is a most difficult disciple. There are times when he will bellow like a bull under the torture; so great is his noise that we must instantly relieve him or the place would be about our ears. For it is no ordinary outcry he makes like that of a soldier under punishment, but a most barbarous and unmeasured hulloing that provokes inquiry. Therefore I have procured this gag which is of most ingenious construction. See here; these screws fit into the two cheeks, here is a neat spike, sharp enough you perceive to keep the tongue from wagging; this part with a bend runs down the throat quite a great way. Why a man would tell all he might know just for the pure privilege of getting shot of it. Eh, what? Saw you ever a finer device?"

Meraud looked at him with cold eyes in a face that grew sensibly paler. All the malice of the man was plain to her. She had had more than one hint from her lady mother of his intentions with regard to herself, which she received with contempt. Now she read in him the triumph of his jealousy.

A strange smile broke over her pale face as she asked him, "Has he confessed anything?"

Puzzled by her manner and expression, he answered, "No, mistress, no. Unfortunately naught but bellow or keep silence. But we shall try a better persuader to-night or to-morrow."

Meraud was learning that it was easier to throw a man into a dungeon than to get him out again. Every effort that she had made to approach the person of

Essex had been in vain. He had noticed her once indeed; but then they had been the centre of a crowd, every eye upon them. She had written him a letter which was rolled up small and carried in the bosom of her gown. She had determined to give it him, but in the end dared not, for she must have done it openly; foolhardy as she was, she had a vague idea that the written word was dangerous: she was soon to find it out.

Small wonder that as she sat upon her bed; as, dressed, she restlessly paced her room; as, below in the hall, she sat silent in her place, her cheek was pale and red alternately, her eye ruminating and turned inwards. What could she do? How could she get at Essex and alone?

In her gown of grey homespun she was sitting listless at the breakfast-table. All about her sounded the hubbub of the morning meal; the FitzPierces were a lusty race; and when father, mother, eight children, twenty servants and retainers all in a high state of bodily vigour are all feeding at once and restraining the emotions of half a score of dogs the noise will be great.

Sir Alan was occupied in quarrelling with his victuals.

"Abominable hard! most nauseously salt! A man could not begin the day on a more unfavourable diet than this beef!"

"Fie for shame of your chiding, sir!" cried his wife. "The beef is good beef enough. Know you not it is the last of the great roan Kilbracken ox? We have ate up one side of him and down the other, and now, thank God, we are very near the tail."

"Mistress Meraud is too fine to eat of him at all!" called out a fine lad of sixteen, with all a brother's

malice. Every one looked at Meraud where she sat silent amid the noise, islanded in her own atmosphere of trouble and grief; her mug of ale was untasted; before her lay her apportioned lump of salt beef on a round wheaten cake, and she had not so much as cut it with her knife.

"She has been sad ever since aunt took her toys from her," said young Alice.

Meraud looked up fiercely. But her mother's controlling eye was upon her.

"It was not for nothing the cat blinked when both her eyes were out," said she, pointing her knife, on which was impaled a fine piece of the Kilbracken ox, towards Meraud.

The girl rose impatiently, an angry retort on her tongue; at that moment the door opened and a servant in the livery of the Clancartys appeared on the threshold.

"Lady Clancarty desires Mistress Meraud FitzPierce will wait upon her instantly," he announced. "I am to attend her."

"I will come, Shaun," said Meraud, escaping with right good will to muffle herself in her hood.

There was a dead silence in the hall of the Clancartys' house as Meraud was ushered in. The old lord, a fine portly man with a large face, was standing in front of the blazing log fire, his chin thrust out; the dame sat on a carved stool near by with a severe countenance that altered not by a line as the girl approached her. Meraud was about to precipitate herself on her aunt's neck after her usual fashion when the chill of that face communicated itself to her and stopped her half way.

Meraud dropped a low curtsey, like a flower that

stoops in the wind, and stood up, her brilliant head uncovered, her hood thrown back.

Her uncle nodded to her with a doubtful face; her solemn aunt relaxed not a line. From a little bag of dyed leather that hung by her side she took a small soiled roll of parchment.

"Come hither, niece," said she, "and look on this and tell me whether the handwriting be yours or no."

Meraud approached, a vague sense of fear stealing over her in spite of all her boldness. She took the roll in her hand; as soon as she touched the parchment, she knew it for her own, a tiny slip, rolled up. It was the enclosure she had sent in her letter to Sir Xylonides Bullen. It was written in Gaelic and this was how it ran:

"Noble youth, will you speak with me privately at the gate of Mary's Meadow at six of the clock to-morrow evening? There is news of a surprising sort for your ear; by the telling of which I would recompense you for all your courtesies.—EMERAUD FITZPIERCE."

The girl was struck speechless; to gain time she read the letter again and again. A change passed over her as she stood there so tall in her long dark mantle like a bright-headed iris that springs from its sheath. The change was like that which passes over a flower when the sun is suddenly hidden. Her very hair seemed less shining because of the shame at her heart, that overflowed in her veins and washed around her like the cold waves of an invisible sea.

"Come, come!" said the uncle; "speak out, girl. I should know your writing. Where is the youth? That letter was found in his chamber by his man here,

Owen Joy, who has got the horse below in my stable. I have had warning from a personage to whom I will not give a name that the youth is missing and must be accounted for. It is no affair of mine, unless it were to be proved that he is come to harm through a relative of my own who had become acquainted with him in my house. Speak up, girl, I say. Why did you write the letter? Where is the lad?"

Meraud tried to speak; it is one thing to know oneself a traitor and an evil doer; another thing to be exposed to the world as such. Her mouth could not frame an answer; her lips were dry; her hands were as cold as though they had been dipped in the chill waters of shame. So she stood helpless in a bitter abasement, all the more bitter to one of her proud spirit.

Lady Clancarty was a generous old woman. She never saw suffering but she wished to relieve it. Now she changed her face and held out a hand to her niece. In an instant the girl was on her knees, glad and thankful to take refuge in the comfortable rich brocade of her aunt's gown.

Lord Clancarty was beginning to weary of the scene; he walked impatiently up and down, while his wife signed to him with her hand.

"Speak now, girl," she said at length. "Remember that the truth is master and commands us all. Better say the truth while you are alive to-day, than have it called out to-morrow above your grave."

"Well, good aunt, I will speak then," said Meraud rising; "here is all the truth. The youth insulted me; or rather I took certain words that he spoke as an insult when he meant none. I revenged myself upon him by delivering him into the hands of Sir

Xylonides Bullen, who took him and his horse in Mary's Meadow, by readily slipping bags over their heads."

Uncle and aunt looked at each other in horror. Was this the child who was in her cradle but yesterday? They looked at her again and saw her for what she was, a woman, brilliant, bold, and dangerous.

"I do repent now," said Meraud. "I would save him if I could."

"Where is he, thou naughty wench?" said the old earl.

"In the Grate and under the torture," answered she.

"God's wounds," said he in a rage. "Women and fools are at the bottom of every mischief. Little do you think what hangs by this youth's captivity."

"My lord," said Meraud, "I know all you could teach me and more beside. Could you but help me, and that at once, to speech with the Earl of Essex, you would do many a service."

"The Earl of Essex, thou baggage!" roared old Clancarty in a rage. "Will no one less than the Earl Marshal of England serve your turn? I have a mind to take you home and bid your father give you a whipping. A little slut to be meddling in high matters! Get home to your needle and your prayer-book, mistress."

For all answer Meraud lifted up her head still higher; her wreathing lips half smiling; her quivering eyelids half closed upon her eyes, while two long cold shafts of light escaped beneath them. The old aunt drew in her breath as she looked at her; here was a maiden the like of whom she had seldom seen. The old man looked at her, cursed, turned away to the window, and sulked in silence.

Lady Clancarty spoke first, shaking her head, and sadly grave.

"Thou wert a bad one to betray the youth in that fashion," she said.

"I do allow it and I do repent," said Meraud with sincerity.

Lord Clancarty turned round and addressed her in an altered manner.

"You have talked with the earl already," said he.

"I have so," said Meraud. "He will listen very readily to me, could I see him alone. I have more than one piece of news for his private ear."

"To see him alone were not proper," said Lady Clancarty.

"Whisht, good aunt!" said Meraud; "we talk of no light matters now."

"It is a difficult thing that you ask for," said Lord Clancarty. "The earl is so surrounded, but I will bethink myself. I shall find a way. Go you home, Meraud, I will come to you before the end of the day."

Meraud curtsied again and silently quitted the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

STABLE COMPANIONS

As Meraud left the hall she paused for a moment in the porch. Then turning to the serving man who stood ready to attend her:

"You have a strange horse in the stables?" said she.

"Yes, lady, a big horse, and a cross one, at that. I have not seen him. He has a man of his own, lady, who takes him out to exercise in the early morning hours."

"I will have a look at him," said the girl. "Wait you here for me, Shaun."

As she went round to the stables her face changed; a queer smile crept over her mouth, a flicker of devilment woke in her. Her uncle had abused her, had he? She could make it so much the worse for him if she wished, and she would too. A word about the horse and sundry other little informations placed in the right quarter would supply her uncle with annoyance sufficient to keep him well occupied for some time to come. Thus she would serve all who interfered with her; she would teach men to dread her.

Smiling so, she came to the yard, and meeting a groom asked him where was the strange horse.

He ran to a door, calling out as he did so: "Have a care, lady, he might leap out on you."

"Go, George," said the high and mighty young madam. "He knows me. I am safe enough."

The man drew the bolt and she stepped inside.

Next moment she was stepping out again when a second thought drew her back. Certainly it was the wrong horse and yet—there was no horse of her uncle's of that height, nor of so unusual a colour.

She stepped inside, closing the door; it was an ordinary loose box; the light was misty and dim; it came from the little window in one long bar filled with dust and motes cast up from the straw below. This bar shot straight upon the queerly dun-shaded side of the creature that faced her.

Meraud knew him again; she spoke the words softly that Estercel had taught her. “Ná bac leithe! Nil si acht a' magadh.”

She had no sooner done so than she wished herself safe on the other side of the door. The horse reared up till he struck the stable roof, then came down with his forefeet wide apart, his hind feet planted together forward. The whites of his eyes rolled in his head and his breath came gushing loud in a double stream from his two nostrils.

She made as if to step up to him, when something in that rolling eye repelled her, warned her of danger.

Tamburlaine's memory was swifter and more certain than a man's; once let him travel a road and he knew it again; every inch of every mile he knew. Once let him look in a face to consider it and he knew it again, knew its sense and its inner meanings. Large tracts of the minds of men were open to his understanding, he knew love and rage; he knew a traitor by the smell of him; and he knew revenge.

That great memory of his that held safe pictured within itself all the woods and hills and streams of the

north, all the changing lights and ecstasies of a thousand days of freedom, was now awake.

As clear as in a glass he saw again the bright-headed one first strike, then kiss, his master. For the blow he hated her, the kiss he but half forgave. All the fire of him, quenched by grief and wounds and sad imprisonment, now started again at the sound of his master's words.

As Meraud watched the creature toss his head up and down, his ears laid back while the foam gathered at the corners of his mouth—as she read the judgment of his eye, her heart misgave her.

Remember that this was a horse trained to battle, also the chiefest horse of his time; you might have travelled far between the four seas and never have found such another; he had his demon rages, had Tamburlaine; he knew how to trample and strike, ay, and tear with his well-furnished jaws. He seemed a dragon-horse to Meraud as she slid panting along the wall to the door.

Now the straw in the corner moved; a man's face was thrust up, and Meraud recognised Owen Joy. He had the blank look of one that wakes from sleep.

“Speak to the horse, man; up and hold him!” she loudly cried.

Tamburlaine turned his shoulder to look at Joy; Joy turned his head to look at the horse, the two consulted together. While gazing every tinge of colour faded down from under the sun-brown of the man's face, his eyes opened to their fullest extent, and his lips became white. He turned his awful gaze for a moment on the girl; then rising to his feet, he uttered a barbarian shout, not loud but fierce and wild.

“Up, up, good horse! Strike the woman down!”

Brave and hardy as Meraud was, at that shout she uttered a low scream and sank down on her knees by the wall.

At the word the good horse raised himself, but came down again; raised himself once more, but, still doubting, came down and planted himself on his forefeet, looking on the girl with a now more gentle eye. As well as possible he knew that Owen was his friend and servant, but not his master. When Estercel spoke he obeyed; when Owen spoke he hearkened, but acted according to his own judgment.

He did not like the woman with the bright head, but he was not going to strike her while she crept in the straw.

Meraud saw his milder eye and her spirit rose. She reared up her head and spoke passionately to Owen. “Traitor and coward,” she said. “I will relate that trick to your master. The horse is a better man than you.”

Owen made one bound across the straw.

“Traitor and coward, you!” said he. “What have you done with my master? Where is he?”

Meraud stood upright and faced him, her back against the wall.

“In the Grate,” said she.

“In the Grate?” said Owen. “Oh, wirra, wirra! As well might you have said ‘in hell,’ to me. Have I then seen his face for the last time in this world?” He wrung his hands in fearful grief. The sight of the beautiful form and countenance of the young woman before him turned his grief to rage.

“Ay, woman of the false tongue,” said he furiously,

"and your doing it is. I have watched you when you thought yourself alone. I have read that letter of the two meanings that took him out to his mischance. There is a punishment for the murderous girl, and such are you. Ay, and a boat on the sea it is, no sail and no oars to it and neither food nor drink. Ay, and you will be known for what you are from one end of Ireland to the other. Many a knife will be sharpened for you. Faith, here is one now that longs for your blood, many nights it has cried in my ear," and he drew a long sharp knife from his belt.

The horse seeing the steel snorted violently and took two steps backward. Meraud stood still and straight.

"Frog-headed fool of a fellow," said she. "What is all this talk of a murderess and Estercel a living man?"

"There are few days of life reserved for them that go into that prison," he answered. "Also Estercel has called upon me in my dreams, and I know that his state is bad."

"It shall not be so for long," said Meraud. "I had power to put him in, for he offended me; I have power to get him out again. I will see the Lord Essex; he will be set free."

The man looked at her doubtfully; he stepped back a pace or two, a little moved by her courage.

"And when?" said he. "They are dying very quick in the Grate sometimes."

"To-morrow," said the girl with cool confidence.

"Swear it," said Owen.

"I swear it."

"Remember," said he, "there is no well deep enough, no hill high enough, no wood thick enough to save you from your punishment if you fail."

"I will remember," said Meraud, and with one glance, half gratitude, half apprehension, at the wise face of the horse, she opened the door and stepped out into the fresh air and daylight.

Meraud was a strong maid, stronger than many a man, but she staggered as she crossed the yard, and when she reached the knees of her aunt she sank down powerless and silent.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TOILET

MUCH noise and rumour arose from the chamber of the Earl of Essex while he dressed of a morning. His lodgings were in the north-eastern tower, and to and from them went a continual stream of very fine gentlemen in rainbow-coloured clothes. The rooms below were crowded and many stood talking on the stairs.

In the midst of the bed-chamber sat the earl, newly come from his perfumed bath, giving his head and beard to his barber, his white hands to two valets, his legs to another, who reverently endued them with silk stockings and riding boots, his ears to ten gentlemen, and his tongue to ten more.

Looking at him so, he appeared to exhale the very aroma of greatness; light, grace, power, ascendancy, seemed to rest upon him like a bright cloud; he was for the time being the source of all profit and eminence in those that surrounded him.

One of those most forward in attending the levee of the earl was Sir Xylonides Bullen, not that he received encouragement, rather the reverse. Just then he was standing by the closet door, a station which he usually affected, when a page brought him a sealed letter which he opened and read with attention, shortly afterwards taking his leave.

At the moment Sir George Carey had the earl's ear. "Pitiful, my lord!" says he, "I tell you it is pitiful;

they lie on the bare ground in the camps, unwatched, untended; there is no surgeon for them, no relief."

"I have no warrant, as you know, dear Carey," said Essex, "either from her majesty or the council to make provisions for the sick; but such open neglect is indeed a scandal to our title of Christians. Cuffe, my purse to Sir George; and Cuffe, let one of my surgeons and one of my chaplains attend Sir George to see what may be done for the relief of the sick. Bedding and sheets, at least, I should wish to be provided in my name."

"Nobly done, my lord," said Sir George, taking the purse from Sir Henry Cuffe and weighing it in his hand; "these are the deeds that are not forgotten to a man, but live on after he is dead."

But Essex merely waved his hand; he was already deep in another man's petition.

This time it was Sir Ralph Birkinshawe who begged to be confirmed in his trust of the keeping of the muster books; he was a little round fat man with nothing pointed about him save his pointed beard and his sharp eyes. "I beseech you to confirm me, my lord," says he; "there be some of them that would have me away from there, for that they see I will not allow so well of their forwardness to lash out her majesty's treasure to make their friends with."

"Well, well, Sir Ralph, I will see what may be done; but I would have you know that the council are in favour of appointing Sir Ralph Lane to the post. And here comes Sir Griffith Markham. Good-morrow to you, sir; and how goes the world with you?"

"Scurvily, my lord, scurvily. I am knavishly dealt with by the council. These five years have I been

petitioning to be made Governor of Connaught. This is no time to be putting men that are but half men in posts of danger. The miserable and sleepy disposition of Sir Arthur Savage will go nigh to wreck her majesty's cause in the west."

Here a slight movement was caused by the entrance of the Earl of Clancarty, followed by a tall page in a black velvet cloak, who took up his station by the closet door.

Sir John Harrington stepped forward; he carried as usual his own translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* under his arm, out of which he was quite ready to read to all and sundry.

"My lord," says he, "the Bishop of Cork is arrived. He is gone in and will soon be coming up. We shall get some sport of him."

"I know the man," said Sir Edward Moore. "He is long and lemon-faced; has a hollow voice much like to the old grey-bearded verger that speaks through the trunk in the Cathedral Church of Gloucester."

"He is famously infamous, or infamously famous, in the south," said Sir John. "His Grace of Ormond tells me that when that excellent Christian gentleman Mr. Thornborowe, the new-made Bishop of Limerick, rebuked him for keeping no trust with the people and calling the Irish priests good milch cows, he answered, 'My Lord of Limerick, when you have been here a twelvemonth no man will believe one word that you speak.'"

Those around the earl laughed and in the middle of their laughter a strange hollow voice was heard speaking loud without, like one used to the pulpit, and the laughter redoubled. Pushing through the crowd came

the lemon-faced bishop in his robes, but before he reached the earl his timidity overcame him, and down he went on his knees and shuffled across the floor upon his marrow-bones.

"Welcome, my lord bishop," said Essex in slightly sarcastic accents.

"Thrice welcome, your gracious excellency, to this thrice miserable land. When without a doubt the sun of your noble presence will dissipate the rheum or fog of rebellion with which we are afflicted."

"How goes her majesty's cause in the south, Mr. Bishop?"

"Ill, my lord, ill," said he of Cork, scrambling to his feet in his excitement. "The insufferable arrogance of the great devil of the north has infected the whole of her majesty's dominions. Oh, were I but a man of war, my lord! Could I but collect the whole foul brood of disloyalty within the compass of this hand how I would crush them!"

"Your hatred of the disloyal Irish, good Mr. Bishop, and your activities against them are well known," said the earl with a smile.

"Would I were more of a terror to them," said the bishop. "Under my very nose and in my own diocese do they pursue their foul traffic. There is a merchant of Cork that buys his powder of the French ships, now in the harbour, sells it to the rebels for a hide, and that hide he returns back to the Frenchman for a French crown—may the Lord of Hosts confound them both, I pray in charity!" added he with a pious snuffle, holding out long hungry fingers that ached for the crowns of the Frenchman.

Essex's valets had now finished his toilet and stepped

away, facing him with profound bows. The great man rose from his chair, turning his back on the bishop and showing plainly on his face the disgust that he felt, while those around him laughed and with some rudeness hustled the holy man out of the way.

It was Essex's habit to step across to his closet, there to say a short prayer alone before setting forth for the day; as he now moved towards the curtained door his face still kept the moody look that the bishop's speeches had brought there.

Sir John Harrington walked at his side. "Cheer your countenance, dear friend," said he. "Do not let the mad words of yonder rascal in lawn sleeves affect you. There are men of his kidney everywhere to be found."

"True, Harrington, but I am not content that men of his sort should be turned loose to prey on the population. I like it not, Harrington, nor that it should be matter of laughter. I have, as you know, a natural antipathy against this service. But *jacta est alea*. I have the best warrant ever a man had and I go in the best cause. Compassion I myself shall not greatly need; for whatsoever the success may be, yet I shall be sure of a fair destiny." As he spoke he raised his voice and addressed the crowded room which gradually became silent; turning as he reached the door he raised his hand and added gravely: "Only I would have your lordships pity Ireland and pity the army committed to my charge."

He spoke impressively, impressing those that heard; but an inexorable Fate that also listened took up her spoon and stirred a fresh ingredient of bitterness into the cup of suffering that she was preparing for him to

drink. With the milk of his own kindness turned to gall she would poison him.

Then he made to enter his closet, but Lord Clancarty laid an arm upon his sleeve and spoke for a moment in his ear. Essex nodded, lifted the curtain, and went in.

The little closet was hung with silken tapestry of a fair blue colour and lit by a narrow window. By it stood the tall page in black velvet with bright uncovered head and pale cheek.

The noise of the gentlemen talking was great without, yet it was in the lowest of low tones that Essex spoke.

"What, is it you, Meraud, my bright favourite! Now why is this disguise and in what can I serve you?"

Meraud fell upon her knees before Essex. She clasped his in her two hands, and spoke in a low whisper.

"My lord, I have been a false woman. I have betrayed a noble youth into the hands of his enemies. George Arglass hath him in the castle pit. Even now he may be torturing him that he may get word of Tyrone's secret message to yourself, my lord."

"Hist, thou silly fool!" Essex leaned forward and shook her by the shoulder: "What do you tell me?" he said in a still lower whisper. "Who is the youth?—the large-boned student with the yellow locks that would to England?"

"The same, my lord, but no student is he . . ."

Essex laid a hand on her mouth. "Where is he now? In the castle pit? When taken, maiden?"

"On Tuesday at evening, my lord."

"By whom?"

"Sir Xylonides Bullen, a bitter enemy of yours, my lord."

The eye of Essex flashed intelligence upon her for one

second, then the lid dropped as with a stern face he silently considered. Meraud spoke in a low voice, scarcely breathed: "He is staunch. They have got nothing from him, my lord."

Again that eye flashed upon her. "How do you know?"

"Sir Xylonides Bullen told it me."

"They will be at no loss to concoct somewhat if we are not too quick for them. Get up, child, and stand," said Essex, and turning from her he clapped his hands.

Sir Henry Cuffe entered the closet.

"Cuffe," says my lord, "George Arglass hath got a man in the Grate whom I would have out. Speak with the young gentleman apart upon the matter. Use a golden argument or one of steel. Use any argument, but out he must come, and that at once." With a wave of his hand in farewell to Meraud he moved for the doorway; but she was too quick for him: she sprang to his side, seized him by the arm, and whispered in his ear:

"My lord, I am in fear of my life; the men of the north will slay me for the imprisoning and torture of this youth. I was set upon but yesterday by man and horse. Help me out of this kingdom, my lord."

Essex looked steadily on her; pale face and whitening lips spoke the reality of her fear. He set a kiss on her cheek.

"Know you, my pretty maiden, that there are men in my position who, far from assisting you, would have you straight put out of their way? You are too bright-witted for an enemy; too foolish bold, too unsafe for an ally. Your place was by your mother's skirts; what bid you venture out where hard knocks are going?"

Meraud grew paler and the large tears rose in her eyes.

Essex took her round chin between his two fingers.

"It is only for a messenger to leave yonder room and in ten minutes by the clock you go straight to your doom."

Meraud drew away from him.

"Good," said she. "Even let it be so. But you mistake me; I am not here because I was afeard."

"Bend no brows on me, sweetheart: I do not threaten. I give you a much-needed lesson in discretion."

"I will observe it, my lord."

"In faith, I hope as much. But cheer yourself now, dear Emerald. I am not so powerless but that I can set those safe that trust to me."

CHAPTER XX

THE PIT AND THE PRISONER

AT eight o'clock that evening three dark figures turned quietly out of the great hall of the castle and took the long passage leading to the Grate.

The head gaoler of the castle led the way. He was a man of size and strength, with a vast paunch and amazingly agile in spite of it. Next to him went Meraud, masked and in a dark cloak; and behind her Sir Henry Cuffe quite unrecognisable in a false beard. As they went on through the stone passage the air grew increasingly cold and foul.

The gaoler turned about and spoke to them in a loud whisper: "Here are no lilies and roses, sirs," said he, laughing till he shook. "Master George Arglass himself carries a clout dipped in eau-de-vie and held to his nose when he has occasion to visit the souls in prison."

But Meraud scarcely noticed the odours which so inconvenienced Sir Henry Cuffe that he covered his mouth with a fold of his mantle. Her whole soul was intent on one thing and on one thing only, the farewell to the passion of her heart. In three days she was to leave Ireland; Essex had found her a friend and protectress in Lady Sentleger, whom she was to accompany on her return to England. Ambitious as she was, she yet felt more than three parts downcast. She was very loth to loose the last link that bound her to the young hero. She divined that all her life after she would compare other men to him.

"I know him for half a fool," she said to herself querulously. "What a crazy jade am I to be so taken with him; yet he is a beautiful fool, and a noble fool, and a staunch fool, and maybe not such a fool after all. Fool thyself, Meraud!" And twenty pictures of the youth rose before her mind's eye.

Strength and beauty have a radiance of their own; light proceeds from them and is scattered around them. Rest yourself on the ground beside a golden flower, and hold your hand above it; a light will be cast up and shine along your palm. The light of a beautiful face, of a shining head, of a clean-grown form issues outwards and wraps face and form alike in a bright cloud. I have seen gold shadows from gold hair lie on white clothes. I have seen a pale bright face shine in a dark room, casting light before it. More especially will the eyes shoot light, clear rays and very strong, sometimes to a great distance. Black eyes will send out burning flames of black and white; grey eyes will send out arrows of blue fire. All these lights can live within the memory; when love or passion add yet a light again to beauty of form, of colour and strength, then the remembered figure will stand very bright in the memory, more brilliant than life, because lit from a double source.

So clothed, so enhanced, the face and figure of Estercel haunted the mind-places of Meraud. She knew that she had done with him, yet his image persisted; persisted in all its original beauty and strength, though now and again black dreams would come when she saw all that remembered beauty tortured and torn.

Most often she remembered him as he played with his horse in St. Mary's Meadow and the two had seemed

to her like winged and fiery creatures of the morning: how should she not have loved them?

With such images, such thoughts, still flitting through her mind she found herself at last standing at the low grated door that led into the prison. Steps led up to it, steps littered with rubbish; odours and strange sounds filtered through the barred door. Her dreams fell away and she saw the actual.

Here in this place every sense was assailed at once; the noise of the opening door awoke the prisoners from their quiet; cries and smothered shouts filled the place with hollow echoings that were flung back from the walls and beat about the low passage roof like dark birds caught in a stone cage. The air was so chill that it penetrated their mantles; it was thick with foulness and showed misty and dim round about the gaoler's lantern. The darkness was heavy and black; not the pure translucent dark of open night; but a vile darkness like that of a thick and abominable curtain flung over the head. All the senses were entangled in it; the lantern served but to show its complexion the better. The only comfortable thing in this net of misery was the sound of a far-away voice, a man's voice, but so dulcet as to be almost a woman's, that sang a song that seemed to have no end and no beginning: so sweet that it pierced through the mixed rumour of the other frantic voices and came whole to the ear.

Seeing the pails of carrion refuse that stood in the passage, Sir Henry Cuffe drew back and was for returning.

"Come on, come on," laughed the gaoler. "Dirt will not bite. Likewise these are the best apartments. If you blench now, what will you do further on? Why

many a poor prisoner would give all that he has to come up to these fortunate isles! ”

Cuffe whispered in Meraud's ear: “Go back, Lady Meraud. I will take you back myself and come again. No Christian stomach can tolerate this and not rebel.”

“My stomach shall be a pagan then,” said Meraud stoutly. “Go on, Sir Henry.”

At the passage end was a narrow, narrow winding stair; just wide enough to let the stout gaoler squeeze himself round and round. Below was another passage and the same vileness. They stood awhile to let the gaoler get done with his panting, and at the noise of their feet and voices, the same callings and cries and groans arose, as a flock of wild birds will fly up from their feeding when disturbed by the passer-by.

But here was no wild voice singing; only at the foot of a low door Meraud saw white fingers that writhed, and a piece of a cheek that lay on the stone, and a voice that called, “Pity, pity, pity,” from under the door. But the stout gaoler had none, for he lifted his boot and trampled and kicked at the fingers and laughed at the scream that followed, as a boy will laugh that stamps on a toad. Meraud had stern words ready on her tongue, but like a coward she forbore; saying to herself, “If I anger him now, he will make Estercel pay for it.”

The next stairs were of the same width, with narrower steps, on which only half the foot at once had leave to rest. As he was preparing to descend, the gaoler took the oil lamp off its nail.

“Take it, your worship,” said he to Meraud; “it is very dark below in the pit and something dangerous were you to slip your foot and fall.”

Deeper and deeper down they went, winding their

way by a close and narrow stair; at the foot of the steps a passage slanted downward with a low roof; so low, indeed, that the little company were forced to bend their backs till they were near doubled in two; the gaoler who stumbled on before at a brisk pace was much inconvenienced and made many ejaculations, which only ceased when they came out from under an arch and stood at last upright on the brim of a circular pit. The depth of it was not great; no more, perhaps, than eight or nine feet below them. A great scuffling and squeaking of rats followed their entrance; the lanterns burned badly and though they could hear a rattling of stones as the creatures ran to their holes, they could make out nothing of them by sight.

"Of all the places I have seen," said Sir Henry Cuffe, "I like this the worst. I wish I were anywhere else. If I were to see the foul fiend himself sitting there below I should say it was the very place for him."

"Nay, nay," said the gaoler laughing, "he has a better place than this; he has a clean lodging, for what so clean as fire? and this is the old cesspool of the castle. Yonder is the spot. Look, there is but a slight flooring of boards placed over the top and that is rotten now and eaten away. A body has need of circum-spection if he would not fall in; and to fall in is death."

Meraud heard with her ears and took in the sense of what she heard; but her eyes and all her thoughts were busy hunting through those dark spaces for a sign of a living man; but there was none; their own voices echoed from the low roof; but for that, the dead and poisonous air was completely still.

Sir Henry Cuffe turned away from the brink, utterly overcome. Meraud's fierce anxiety spurred her on.

"Where is the prisoner?" she asked. "I can see nothing at all."

The gaoler stooped and lowered his lantern till a faint light lit the black floor below.

"There he is, safe enough and quiet enough," said he. "Near gone by this, I expect. They are dying very quick here. One died here yesterday; but this one is rare and strong."

Meraud looked where the finger pointed; a pale white glimmer seemed to float and flicker above the boards; there was no movement really, it was only her eyes that trembled in her head, shaken by the beating of her heart. "I will go down," she said. Going over to Sir Henry Cuffe, she took from the poor groaning creature her own light basket, while the gaoler dragged forward and placed in position a ladder that lay by the passage wall.

The stout man came down first, Meraud followed and safely reached and stood upon the filthy floor; at the first moment she fainted up against the stout man's shoulder, but the next second she had thrown it off, and holding up her lantern she crept along in the direction of the white shadow she had seen.

She reached the place; oh, what a vengeance lay before her! Never, never was she to forget! this picture of the havoc she had made was to be graven deep in the frame of her mortal memory for as long as it should last. Stretched along in the darkness of that loathsome floor lay that great form, blood-stained, dirt-stained, naked, save for a cloth about the loins, an image of pained and desolate mortality. The gaoler stooped and laid a hand upon the breast.

"Faith, he's there yet," he said; "for a groat I

thought he was gone," and he looked him up and down.

Meraud kneeled down shuddering upon her knees and held the lantern up; she moaned like one in mortal pain. "Oh! oh! oh!" she said, and still, "oh! oh! oh!"

Where was all his beauty gone? Was this horrid thing indeed Estercel? She held the lantern to his face, his mouth was open wide and filled up with a swollen bleeding tongue; his eyes were shut and sunk far down in his head. Coarse hair bristled upon his face. The hair of his head was black and matted; across the mottled purple skin of his forehead the vermin travelled, fast and slow.

Meraud lifted up one heavy hand, then let it drop again; the rats had gnawed the bloody finger ends.

Meraud moaned on like a creature in agony. She never knew what sounds she made, but her voice reached Sir Henry Cuffe, who recovered himself somewhat and, descending the ladder with cautious steps, came to her side.

"Faith, that's a pity," he said in his everyday voice. "A fine frame of a fellow like that. Six feet four or five, I should say, and well put together. Is he gone, Mr. Gaoler?"

"Ah, no; ah, no," said the gaoler. "He'll do nicely yet. The rats have been at him, but not much. But we had better move him. Once they begin they'll soon make an end."

"Get your men, Mr. Gaoler, and move him then. Come away, mistress," said Cuffe. But the girl shook her head and made no move. "Mistress, forgive me," he went on, "I have a weak stomach that will in no

wise permit me to remain here. I will await you in the near end of the passage. If you call I will come at once."

Meraud never even heard him. She had taken the eau-de-vie from the basket and was essaying to pour some drops into the open mouth. The gaoler, who lingered on, watching her curiously, laid his hand upon hers.

"You'll burn his mouth," he said. "Water is best for him. He's sore from the gag. Now that gentleman up there and myself, too, could make good use of the brandy."

Meraud paused a minute, then added a few drops of brandy to the soup she had brought and handed the rest to the gaoler. She bathed the face and the bleeding hands with water; she bathed the broad chest, rubbing with her two palms, strong and warm, above the still beating heart. She never saw that she had been left alone; and as she worked she sighed aloud, lost to all but her own agony.

The spectacle of his misery was like a whip that scourged her; her armoury of weapons was taken from her; pride and delight, vanity and malice, were slain and she was left trembling and bare.

Diligently she worked, lifting up that frightful head that had once been so powerful and fair; again and yet again she passed drops of soup into the mouth, till it seemed that some was swallowed.

The little rats came and sat in a half circle round, longing for their meal. While Meraud waited she watched them in the dim light of the lantern; one came quite near to her and sat and washed down its pretty brown sides and smoothed its whiskers and little delicate ears.

"I am no better than you," said Meraud, softly talking to it while the creature looked at her; "I have served him worse than any of you."

A small, small sign and then a struggling groan, another and another came from the mouth of Estercel; his face changed: Meraud's heart bounded half with horror, half with hope; how frightful to see a hideous dead thing come to life: how merciful that she was not to be a murderess. His eyes opened and rested upon her.

Meraud lifted up his head again and fed him with the soup; it was from the castle kitchen, and strong and good. In spite of the swollen tongue, she got it down and he began to revive. Meraud had thrown aside her cap and mask; her hair sunned itself all about her head. The tears ran on her white cheeks and dripped from her chin. All the time he ate the miserable man kept his eyes upon her face; now and again when she paused, afraid of feeding him too fast, his swollen tongue moved in his mouth and he tried to speak, but could only mumble unintelligibly.

When he had taken all the soup, he remained quiet for a time with his head upon her knees while she chafed his forehead and hands.

Then he opened his eyes again and a look of awful sweetness spread from his eyes and passed upon his face. She bent down to listen as he tried to speak again. At first she could not make out what he was saying: then she caught two or three words:

"Bread of the angels!" he stammered out.

Meraud could not understand him at first; then suddenly the whole scene of Crispin and Crispinianus in their prison cell returned upon her mind, and she found herself repeating aloud, "Bread of the angels is whole-

some cheer." The thought of them and the miserable now came upon her and her tears came down afresh. She leaned over him.

"Estercel," she said. "Will you ever forgive me, Estercel?"

There was no answer.

In silence they sat; the little rats never moved, but sat watching; they smelt the bread and soup, but they were afraid of Meraud and remained still. In that vile place a sort of peace could be felt, the peace of repentance and the quiet of pain.

Suddenly a sense of some change ran through all the veins of Meraud. Something was different. Estercel had moved; he was pulling himself sideways away from her, as far as his shackled feet would allow. She started and looked down at him; his face was convulsed, he pushed himself backwards from her, he glared upon her with fury as he reared up his head. He was trying to speak, but the words would not come.

Filled with fear, Meraud got upon her knees. Estercel raised himself on his hands.

"Curse you," he said in loud thick voice, "a curse on you!"

Meraud moved backwards in terror, but not fast enough, for raising himself still higher the wretched man spat full in her face. Meraud leaped to her feet and screamed with horror and rage.

"Ay, take that," he stammered, "or come near that I may strike you down. A curse on every drop of food and drink I have had of you. Look now, false devil that you are, was I not dead already, that you must be summoning me back from Paradise to my torment?"

Meraud wiped her face in the corner of her mantle. For a moment she remained silent; was such an indignity to be borne even from the dying? Then hearing the feet of the men who returned, she forgot all but his extremity.

"I have deserved it, Estercel," she said, "but I came to take you out of this place. I have been very sorry, Estercel. Will you not forgive me? You have punished me now."

And all the time that she spoke to him it seemed that she was talking to a corpse. How could a slain man forgive his slayer? That wild and awful figure opposite, faint, bleeding, maimed, distorted, could it indeed forgive?

Slowly it turned from her, and sank down upon the hideous floor, while now the voices of the men returning could be heard above.

"Estercel," said the girl, again coming nearer to him, "perhaps I shall never see you again. They are coming now to take you away. Will you forgive me before we go?"

The figure on the floor shivered and shook as if with weeping; something moved and wavered in the miserable darkness, a hand that was searching blindly; was it to find her own?

She stepped forward, and though fearing greatly, she took it; in both hers she clasped and kissed it, then looking on it, saw on the little finger the same twisted golden ring. With fear and humility in her heart she bent down and kissed it in token of a pure repentance.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HOPE OF OWEN

TAMBURLAINE soon got his health again now that he had Owen Joy to be his servant and to give him all the love and the company that he liked to have. It was a hard matter to keep him quiet. He would romp and clatter in his stable, making a noise like that of ten; and all the horses and mares in the stalls around would plunge and tear at their chains and whinny in answer to the trumpeting of his voice. The breath of the spring was in his nostrils and his heart longed for his own country. Moreover, he was not used to so much dry food; he had always had his liberty on the hillside or in the fields, and plenty of sweet grass: now the warm stable and the rich corn heated his blood over much. Also Estercel had brought him up more like a dog than a horse; he had the habit of play; imprisonment was therefore worse for him than for another.

Owen had to make a big horsecloth for him to conceal as much of his curious colour as possible and take him out for a gallop among the mountain valleys of Wicklow; the pulling of the great horse was such that Owen returned home with his arms sore at the shoulders and his hands cut with the leather of the rein.

"Ah," said he, shaking his head reproachfully at the horse as he watered him in the stable, "you're not good; no, you're not. You're wanting home. Some day you'll be doing a bolt, my fine boy, and leaving master and all behind."

The little babe that cannot speak understands every word the mother says. So did the horse understand his good servant. He left his water and lifted up his head all dripping from the bucket and looked at Owen with sad questioning eyes. He could not bear a reproach in the stable, though when his blood was up Owen might use all the curses ever he could invent and Tamburlaine would neither hear nor heed.

"Yes," said Owen, "you're forgetting the master; you have no heart at all. Look at me, the way I am; thin as a rag and harished; and look at you, the satin and the silk is not in it with your coat," and he stroked down his yellow-white neck.

The horse knew he was praised, but the sad tone went to his heart; he laid his head on Owen's shoulder, remembering his woes and the dear master he had lost.

"There, there," said Owen, "go back to your drink; you're not so bad after all. I know you have a feeling heart; and isn't it only natural that you'd want to take your exercise when you have the chance."

A tap came to the stable door and a lad's voice called, "Owen!" He waited till the horse had done drinking, then came out, carrying the pail.

"You're wanted within," said the young groom.

Owen went into the house and was taken at once into a small dark room, used as a gun-room, on the ground floor.

There he waited for long enough. At last the door opened and a lady entered dressed in black clothes. It was Meraud, but quite another Meraud. She was pale and red-eyed, and grief had been cutting new lines about her mouth.

She held up her head and spoke calmly and fearlessly

to Owen; and he, remembering his own threats and ill-deeds and the knife in his belt, respected her for her courage. Ever since she had been in the stable he had been thinking what a fool he had been not to cover up his anger and hatred. He had put himself entirely into her hand; ay, and the horse too. She had got all three of them in her hand to play with, powerful sorceress that she was, thought Owen, as he looked at her standing in the door.

Owen was dressed in long trousers tight to the leg, and a rough tunic all of pale-coloured woollen home-spun belted about the middle. His knife was stuck in his belt and he wore solid shoes of half-tanned leather. His big hands hung down by his sides; his black beard showed threads of grey, and his black eyes looked keenly out over the top of his crooked nose. He was ready for either perfidious peace or open war.

But he had small chance for either. Without fear or uneasiness Meraud spoke to him in few brief words.

"I have seen his excellency the earl marshal," she said, "and Estercel will be set free."

"Is it true what you say?" said Owen, a sort of bitter earnestness in his manner.

Meraud took no notice of his question; she went quietly on: "Come to-night at seven o'clock to the gate of the Storehouse Tower, and he will be given up to you at that hour."

"Mary be praised," said Owen.

Meraud turned to leave the room, then hesitated, looking at the man's radiant face, all over joy and simplicity.

"He is weak and ill," she said.

"What matter for that since we have him?" said

Owen. "He's great and strong. A good waft of the fresh air and a little sup of sour milk and he'll be all right enough."

"You had better have a stretcher to carry him," said Meraud.

"Ah, no," said Owen; "ah, no! A stretcher for the like of him, is it? He'd be laughing at me. It's his own good horse I'll bring with me, that goes as easy as the swallow. Sure if he was dying Estercel would know how to ride him." He sighed deeply. "I think my heart will burst with joy," he said, pressing his two hands tight over it.

Meraud looked gravely at him.

"And as for you, noble young woman," he went on, "I will endeavour to pardon you for your evil-doing if my master wishes it. I am glad after all to think I shall not have to kill you, for it's poor work warring upon women."

Meraud made as though she heard nothing.

"Seven o'clock," she said. "Wait by the horse-pond at the gate of the Storehouse Tower," and then she went away.

CHAPTER XXII

THE RELEASE

ALL day the castle, the camp, and the city had been full of rumour of excitement. The amazing decision of the council and the great earl marshal had been made known. A host had come over to crush Tyrone and the north; that host and its renowned captain were about to turn their backs upon their adversary and conquer him by marching south: and that under the eyes of all Europe and against the furiously expressed will of a most powerful sovereign. Essex might struggle, half-aware; Elizabeth might rage, unconscious, and send out letter after letter of magnificent vituperation and remonstrance; she and he were equally powerless for the nonce in the hands of clever Cecil, who was forcing Essex to grind the axe for his own destruction.

Therefore the heavy cannon were already ploughing their road southward and the stoutest of the soldiery getting ready for the march; to-morrow, the 9th of May, Essex was to astonish Christendom by setting out backwards in all his glory. For now May was in, and the fresh grass was everywhere springing, a carpet for the feet of men and a pleasure to their eyes, a spread banquet for the hoofed beasts. All round the coasts the sea appeased herself and smote the rocks more gently. In all the glades of the woods the young flowers rose up dressed in many colours, and throwing off so liberal a perfume that it blew about the paths and meadows

until to meet it was a delight. And if the rooted green life of the meadows was happy, the free creeping, running, active creatures were many times happier. Theirs was a conscious excitement. The birds went wild in their joy, and not less wild of heart was Estercel's white horse, whenever he might escape from his stable into the free air.

Earth and sky were turning gold in the sunset light as Owen and his little troop rode round the outskirts of the town. They went by circuitous ways to reach the horse-pond near the north-east tower of the castle. Owen rode on Tamburlaine, whose coat was now of a strange-looking cream-colour; he fretted and chafed and could hardly be held in, so eager was he for galloping and play.

It was still the full light of evening as they reached the pond's edge. They took up their station where a few trees might serve them as cover. Overhead the crows and jackdaws were wheeling to their nests; the quiet of evening was setting in. All about the pond the ground was trodden by the feet of the horses; the last bunch of them, four or five led by a lad who rode bare-backed, were trotting off in the direction of Dame's Lane. Opposite them stood the old grey walls and towers of the city and the sounds of evening reached their ears. Right in front of them was the square Storehouse Tower, solid and strong with many narrow windows: a small arched door opened on to a rubbish shoot which here almost choked the gripe or moat that surrounded the castle walls. As they watched, a man came out of the door with a sack of rubbish on his back, which he shot down by the side of the moat; there he stood and aired himself a while, rubbing his hands

together; then returning again, closed the door behind him. Now and then they heard bursts of shouting and laughter from bands of soldiery returning to camp. Scarcely any one was in sight but a tall stout gentleman with a page by his side who walked slowly up and down on the other side of the horse-pond.

The clock of the castle struck seven. The hearts of Owen Joy and his men beat in their throats as they watched the gates.

How would he come forth?—with a guard of soldiery?—with drums beaten? The excitement of the men communicated itself to the horses. Tamburlaine plunged and reared; he was becoming more and more ungovernable; not a man on earth could have mastered him but Owen; he slipped to the ground and pulling on his bridle smote him full on the face and spoke words of bitter reproach.

“It’s a pity you haven’t more sense,” he said. “Here we are on the great day waiting for the master and you can think of nothing but your own diversion.”

Tamburlaine rolled his eyes upon Owen in anger and contempt. He tossed his mighty neck and head, lifting Owen off his feet; he sweated; he snuffed the air and uttered a loud and piercing neigh. Now Owen lost his temper and struck the horse again; he might as well have struck a thunderbolt, for the horse screamed and shook himself, then reared heaven-high; throwing Owen to the ground and dashing the turf from his heels he galloped away free.

The men looked at each other in consternation. They knew well that no one could take Tamburlaine unless he came in of himself.

“Are you hurt, Owen?” they said.

Owen got up slowly, cursing as he rose.

"The devil's in the horse," he said, and stood scratching his head as he watched him trot in a half circle, coming round in the light breeze like a boat with its white sails spread.

"Queen of Heaven, is it a bath he wants?" said Maurice, for Tamburlaine trotted to the edge of the moat and, lifting his head, neighed again and loudly; putting one hoof before another with extreme caution he stepped down into the shallow water.

"It's a drink he wants," said Owen; "he'll come back of himself;" and he turned his eyes towards the Essex gate looking to see the guard of soldiers and the well-known form of Estercel.

"What in the world is he doing?" said Maurice, laughing aloud.

Owen looked and there was the horse scrambling up the rubbish strewn bank on the further side of the ditch.

"Well," said Owen, "you'd think that would be the last place a horse would go of himself!"

They watched him laughing, sure that now he was quiet and, so to speak, reasonable, he would certainly come back. For all the temper had gone out of him, and he stood quietly smelling at the old brown sack the man had thrown out, and now and then lifting his head and looking across at them.

"Oh, Mary have pity!" cried out Maurice, in so awful a tone that Owen turned like a shot from watching the gate.

"Easy, easy, man, what's the matter with you now?" he said, following the finger of the man who with open mouth pointed at the horse.

"As sure as death," he said, quaking, "I saw it move. Look at it, look!"

They all gazed, their eyes starting in their heads, as something like a man's arm came up from the rubbish heap and a hand touched the horse's neck.

"Come on, Maurice. Stay you with the horses, Michael," and with a bound he was off, running like a deer for the narrow plank that crossed the gripe. In another moment he was by the side of the horse.

There was the cold plunge into woe for Owen. Where was the guard of soldiers and the beaten drum? Where was all the glory of Estercel? There lay the hero, thrown out like a sucked lemon from the hand, and above him stood his horse, weeping large slow tears from his great eyes while the hand of Estercel, covered with sores, touched the side of his face. For he was alive, was Estercel, and the air revived him; those awful eyes of his smiled at Owen out of their deep pits and his thick tongue tried to stammer out a welcome.

Owen gasped with rage and grief as he lifted up his master's head. A long string of horrible curses mixed with words of sweetest love and pity came out of his mouth.

"What have they been doing to you? Are you broken all to pieces, lord?" he said, and supporting him on his breast, tried over his joints with a gentle hand. "You're never going to die, dear?" Then rousing himself with energy out of his grief, "Come," he said, "we must get you out of this," and looking round at the place they were in he roared out with rage at the insult. "Can you sit a horse, Estercel?" he asked.

"Ay," said the young man.

Owen shook his head. "You'll go easier by the plank

than by the gripe," said he, and bidding Maurice lift him, he charged him on his back; stepping softly and easily he crossed the ditch and lowered him with care on to the grass under the trees.

"I am thirsty," said Estercel.

"Run, Maurice," said Owen, "see you get a clean drop where the stream runs into the pond;" for the little river Poddle, that took part of its course through the moat, here turned some of its water into the pond.

Maurice came back with his leather cap full and Estercel drank it all.

"Now, dear, we'll try you," said he, and he went to the horse who had followed like a dog and bade him kneel down on his knees.

Tamburlaine obeyed. Owen and Maurice lifted Estercel between them and placed him in the saddle; then the horse steadily rose. For one moment Estercel sat upright and looked around, then he sank upon the horse's neck.

Weeping, the two servants lifted him down again.

"I am thirsty," he whispered, and Maurice ran to the stream once more.

The stout gentleman who had been walking up and down came forward; the page waited for him at a little distance. Recognising Lord Clancarty, Owen stepped out to meet him and bowed low.

"I have got him, lord; but he is hardly to be called alive. He wants some woman to wash and clean him. I fear to handle him he is so sore."

Lord Clancarty stooped down, then raised himself again, horrified. The eyes of Estercel were shut and his soul was playing in a dream.

"Poor fellow, poor fellow," said Lord Clancarty. "It is no use for me to try and speak with him now. I have provided for him to be taken to the house of Ann Ahohone at the boundaries of Ring's End; her I can trust; and there he will have nursing and food and I will come and see him." Then he stood back to watch how Owen would get him away.

He began by taking the saddle off Tamburlaine, rolling his own mantle into a pad for his broad round back; next he unbuckled the saddle-girths and Tamburlaine's bridle rein, and joining them made a long band. Once more they raised Estercel and charged him on the horse's back, laying him down at his ease, with his head on the broad white neck. It was a hard matter to dispose of the long legs of Estercel. In the end one was doubled up and the other hung down. Over him they spread his own mantle and then Owen passed the bands around and, pulling gently but firmly, bound him down.

Owen went round and looked his master in the face. "How are you now, lord?" he said. "Is it very uneasy with you?"

Estercel opened his eyes. "It is the best bed I have had this many a day," said he, and his voice was louder and something clearer.

All this time the horse had stood as patiently as though he were twenty years old, and the son of an ass, obediently kneeling and raising himself, occasionally putting forth a huge warm tongue to lick at the hand or face of Estercel. Now at the clearer sound of his voice he lifted up his head and, whinnying, turned himself about to see his master's face. Owen clapped his hand upon his bridle, and "Reach me the rein off the bay horse,

Maurice," he said; "he'll be going off with the master next."

It was now well after eight o'clock and a soft windy dusk was coming down. Under the trees it was fairly dark; all decent and quiet folk were indoors for fear of the cut-purses and, worse still, the cut-throats that ranged about at this hour. The last crow and the last jackdaw had settled for the night, and the soft-winged and soft-footed creatures that love the night had begun to come from their hiding-places.

This is the hour that the creatures of the plains love beyond anything, the hour of excitements when memories a thousand years old peer from behind the trees, when the blood is up, and the air is sweet as a dream, and the fairy armies from the hills come down and rush behind the galloping heels. This was the hour that Tamburlaine loved: he lifted his head and blew clear through his nostrils and his heart swelled within him with an emotion of love and pity that was half fear. It was not so that his master was used to ride.

Then it was that the black page crept forward to say farewell. She took the hand of Estercel in her own, covered as it was with unhealed sores, and kissed it. Estercel opened his eyes upon her and smiled, and she bent forward and left a kiss on his thin and haggard cheek. The horse turned his head round and looked closely at the page's face. Meraud stroked his forehead.

"I'll not forget how you would not hurt me!" she said.

Tamburlaine tossed his head snorting loud, for he distrusted that countenance and he remembered too much. The sudden movement twitched the rein out of Owen's hand. Tamburlaine felt himself free and

started a few feet away, standing to shake his head and look around him. He was angry with Owen since he had struck him and he despised him for a fool because the blow was causeless and Owen himself stupid and in the wrong. Seeing him go free, Owen and Maurice ran forward together to take the rein. Their rapid movement startled him in his excitement and he trotted out from among the trees making a wide circle.

Owen saw his mistake. "Hold back," he shouted to Maurice. "Take him easy or he'll be off."

Tamburlaine stood for a minute there on the grass, his forefeet spread wide apart, his hind feet drawn up together, his head and strong neck rocking between his shoulders; his heart was beating fast and drumming in his ears like the noise of battle. The uneasy weight on his back frightened and disturbed him at once. Not so was Estercel wont to ride: the salt taste of his sufferings and maladies was on the horse's tongue: fear of unknown calamity beset him; fear of darkness, of men's cruelty half understood, of narrow and miserable prison. The odour of the whole city was hateful to him; every breath of his body, every drop of his blood, cried out for his home in the north.

He saw the three men coming forward to take him, he heard their voices of hypocritical softness, and knew well what they would be at. The earth began to fly in clods from his pawing feet, a sign of his rising temper. Wildness came upon him that was half terror, half delight; he trotted a few steps forward, then with a mad bound that near shook the life out of Estercel he was off!

He heard the shouting behind him, but ten seconds of that mighty speed left it far away. He knew the road

to St. Mary's Ford; once there he took the cold water gingerly and with caution; he got across, though the depth and force of the stream would have swept a lesser creature down and away. Dripping like a dog he came out, stood a moment to listen to the faint groan of his master, then off with him into the Stony Batter, the paved highway that led to the north. Far away behind he heard the shouting on the other side of the river, but that soon faded away.

For Owen recalled his men; and they stood in a little group looking upon each other in dumb distress. Slowly Owen shook his head up and down, his lips compressed in bitterness.

"We've done finely," he said, "finely for the master. He's off to the north. And the master will die on his back."

"Oh, what sense has a horse?" said Maurice.

"More than you anyway, this one has," said Owen angrily. "Come, boys, we might as well try to be catching the north wind, but we must ride after him this night."

Returning to their horses they found Lord Clancarty and the black page were gone: then Owen kneeled down and laid a blighting curse on the city of Dublin and its inhabitants and more especially on the red-headed witch girl who had betrayed his master. Then not feeling quite sure whether his curse was heard, he rose up and, fetching a handful of hay and straw from the nose-bag of one of the horses, he spoke a Druid curse upon them both that was ten times more powerful and withering than any Christian sort, and threw the wisp in the direction of the town. Satisfied in his mind, he watched the wind idly carry it away.

He had good reason to be satisfied; for a heavy punishment was preparing for Meraud. Three days afterwards she stood by the side of Lady Sentleger on board the good ship *Falcon* and watched the wide stately ring of blue mountains dropping away from before her face.

Ten minutes more and Lady Sentleger was on her back below in a miserable cabin and Meraud attending upon her. And then the English lady did so scold and trounce her, calling her Irish ape and fool and worse, that between such peevishness and the motion of the vessel Meraud wept many a salt tear before she reached England's shore. Ay, and many a tear did she weep in England too before she came to power and place; many a hard English box of the ear taught her to regret Irish woods and mountains, the free air and the free spirit of her early youth.

More than once she thought to return, for there was in her nature a heroic wildness: but stronger was the lure that for ever enticed her. She had looked early into pleasure's magic glass, had seen therein the cold eyes, the hard heart, and the passion-fed lips of pleasure herself: and the glamour had passed upon her. Forever turning aside in repentance, continually redeeming ambition by true greatness, she was yet rendered incapable of simplicity.

The wooden trencher and the salted bread: the cold sweetness of the rain: the bare trees of winter and the misted hills: gentle fidelity and patient watchings in the night—savours and fragrances such as these are lost to those who long to be dipping the silver spoon in the gold dish.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RIDE

THERE were men on the road to the north that night who witnessed the passing of Tamburlaine in the twilight; seeing the strange burden he carried, more than one would have stood forward to hold him had they dared; but he appeared of so unnatural a greatness as he leaped forth white as cream through the curtains of the dusk that they shrank back, afraid it might be a fairy horse and that ill luck might follow.

It was indeed a fairy world and a fairy hour to Tamburlaine. In one moment Freedom has been given him, and independence of the will; also his heart was satisfied, though he grieved for his master's suffering; yet the feel of him on his back was joy and content.

Few affections of the heart are left to the creatures we enslave. From the side of the stallion we take the mare, from the cow we take her calf; the companion of the yoke is snatched away from his brother. As a child I have watched the horses standing in the fields at sunset, their tall necks interlaced, their large eyes open in the evening light, most happy in that hour of peace and silent friendly love. I have seen the wild and lonely looks of the young horse taken away from all that it has loved. Often and often I have thought on the aching of the heart that they must feel in their dull imprisonment. Memory restores for me the picture of a brown mare, large-eyed, long-limbed, quite gentle,

but of an extraordinary temper. On moonlight nights she was neither to hold nor to bind. No wall nor fence was high enough to keep her; over she went, to gallop the night through, looking for some country where she might be free. Her companions made shift to follow her; strange horses would leap their fences to join her, and the troop would sweep the country for twenty miles round. People awaked in their beds at night by the noise would turn over saying, "There goes the wild mare from Lisnover; there'll be some broken fences by morning."

Now Tamburlaine was much greater and fiercer than this mare; also he was bound for home, a home that he passionately desired. Also he carried with him the thing he loved most in the world; and behind his back lay fear. He had every reason for swift going, and mighty swiftly he went. And each spring of the powerful creature meant anguish to the bones of his master; at first his breath died away in him, his head and heart fainted; then old use and wont awoke in him, and taught him to measure what slight movement he could make to the rise and fall of the gallop. The liquid pureness of the air revived him and the warmth of the horse's broad back beneath him saved him from perishing of the deadly chill of his faintness.

Without pause or slackening Tamburlaine held on his way till he reached the tiny city of Swords. The ghosts of the dismantled abbey and dead churches rose up within its walls like trees in a springless winter: silence that was all sadness sheeted it down; not an echo was heard of all the choir of bells that had rung there for more than a thousand years.

Tamburlaine checked his gallop on the bank above

the stream; he was breathing hard, having come seven miles without a break. A dog barked below and another answered him; he had no mind to have them after him with a helpless master on his back. He raised his head and gazed about him remembering the road he had travelled before; he looked seawards and saw the bulk of Lambay rising from dim water.

A deep, deep sigh from his master called him out of his thoughts.

With the softest and gentlest whinny of love he turned his head. Estercel reached out a hand to him and touched his face. In a low whisper Estercel began to say to him the old words of affection. All their mad play and madder ridings came back to them both and their joy was great.

"Oh, rascal, son of a rascal," muttered Estercel in his thick hoarse tones, "have you run away with your master? Kill or cure now it is, sure enough. Have you anywhere in your head the sense to get us both home to Ardhoroe? You must be wise for both, O white swan, wings of the day, snow-wind, sky runner!"

So he praised and flattered him; then of a sudden his strength failed him; his horse seemed to him nothing but a beast after all with no hands to help him. Tears began to run out of his eyes and his head sank down. "Almighty God," he muttered, "will I ever hold out? I'm afraid I'll be dead before morning."

Such a strange complaining coming from his master puzzled and worried the horse; he shook his head impatiently, blew through his nostrils, and prepared to descend the bank and cross the rapid little stream.

There was a light in the fort that guarded the opposite bank and seeing this he took his way up-stream for

a hundred yards, then down the bank. Had he been alone he would have gone down head first in a couple of bounds, but now instinctively kept himself level, going carefully sideways, and letting his hind-quarters down first.

Below it was very dark; only the reflection of the pale light of the moon glimmered on the stream. The sound of its fast running water roused Estercel, and as the hoofs of the horse splashed it up he raised himself.

"Stand!" said he; the horse stood like a statue, glad to obey once more. He tried to reach the water, but it was not high enough. "Go on!" he said, and the horse took his careful steps, turning his head and waiting for the word to stop. The rapid water was now above his knees, nearly to the shoulder. He stopped and Estercel bent over and raised water in the hollow of his palm and drank again and again; it was sweet as milk and exceedingly pure. When he could drink no more he bowed his wretched face and head, longing the while to plunge his whole sick body in, he who swam like an otter and laughed at the cold.

When it was over and he could drink no more, he patted the white sides of the obedient creature and said: "Now, my brave fellow, shall we make for home and Ardhoroe?"

At the words the horse burst into a loud neigh; the voice of his master had spoken aloud the desire of his heart; with a bound he was up the opposite bank; shaking his head and mane, he took one glance heavenward and around with his owl's eyes that loved the night, then throwing himself on the neck of his desire, he abandoned the highway and rushed straight as an arrow for the north.

Then followed a night of cruel toil: for Estercel the hours passed in a dull dream, broken by moments of bodily anguish and illuminated by moments of exquisite delight; for in his weary dreaming he would fancy himself under the torture in his prison; then at some wilder leap of the horse beneath him he would open his eyes to see the dark lovely shadows of rock and tree, the merry stars and the delicate light of the half moon above him. In place of the foul odours of his prison he smelt the unpolluted sweetness of the temperate wind and knew himself a prisoner only to his horse.

There were two things that Tamburlaine distrusted, bogs and men: he preferred the high ground, however difficult, eschewed both the walled houses of the invader and the round huts of those they had enslaved.

On leaving the paved road he made along Broad Meadow water, forded it, and breasted the rising ground till he neared Caragha; keeping to the wilder country he passed the Hill of Tara. Then he stood and looked around him. Smelling the water of Boyne on his left he coasted along till he saw the Bridge of Slane, the tiny walled town, the monastery, and the castle. Forty miles he had come and that with a heavy man on his back that was more like a sack of bones than the creature of springing muscles he used to be. He felt himself discouraged. For a long time now his master had not spoken to him; he had been through scores and scores of difficult places. He had leaped broad ditches and threaded his way through dark woods, he had been often sorely perplexed; instinct and memory had all but failed him and more than once, and his master had given him no help. But now he was through a third part of

his task and there was the Bridge of Slane that he had crossed on his journey up.

His instinct now was to avoid the bridge and the little fort beside it and the town, now sleeping sound: yet he knew of no ford and the faint shining river looked broad in the moonlight.

He stood awhile, then cropped a few mouthfuls of sweet grass. Presently he raised his head and whinnied to his master. The quiet and the silence and the well-known sound roused Estercel; he moved within his bands; his eyes opened; he was full of pain, confused with it: his bones were working through his flesh. The horse whinnied again, more loudly than before. Estercel put out a hand and touched his neck; the horse turned his head and with his large eyes watched the weak stained hand creep up and down. Loneliness was all about them: and very little light: danger waited everywhere; pain had conquered the man and heavy toil had begun to press upon the horse. Yet such a mutual love was between them that their hearts were at peace and took delight in each other.

Tamburlaine whinnied again; his voice said: "Rouse up, look around, give your orders." Estercel understood. He tried to turn, but his limbs and his whole body had stiffened and he groaned in pain. "I'm dying, boy, what's stopping you?" he said. The horse moved sideways on and spoke once more and louder. Estercel raised his head and neck, saw the water and the faint outline of the little town. For a moment a flame of excitement flickered up in him.

"My God!" he said, "that's the Boyne. That's great. That's great. You've done it well. Good lad, good lad. You can't go by the bridge. I've had

enough of prison. You must swim, boy, swim." His head sank down again as the horse neighed to him in delight at his words of praise.

He had well understood; down the bank he went, straight and steady; then slowly and carefully into the stream till the water swept him from his feet; swimming, he was soon across and stood dripping on the other side. Estercel had not escaped the water; the night wind blew on the wet folds that covered his stiff limbs and he shivered and shook. Only the warm sides of the horse below him kept the life in his body as yet.

There were no prancings and head shakings now as Tamburlaine rose up to the high ground called Windy Harbour; no pleasure in the work, but a long steady stretching canter that took them across the wet and moory bottoms of Cremorne. Hour by hour passed, hours of lake and ruined forest where the stumps of oak thirty feet round stood out of the ground; past lakes where the water-fowl whined to each other as they went by, and so up into the highlands of Armagh. As Tamburlaine, trotting now, came in the earliest dawn to cross the hill among the rushes and sprit grass by Cranagh lake, a troop of half-wild horses swept down upon him, and enclosing him in their midst played and gambolled mile after mile by his side. They were led by a black mare who was pleased by the white neck of Tamburlaine and angry and spiteful against the strange burden that he carried.

But the heart of Tamburlaine was heavy within him, he was in no mood for fighting or for play. Though he raised up his neck and answered her calling, yet he held straight on his way. Annoyed with this, she threw herself straight across his path and broke his trot.

Tamburlaine jerked up his head and, getting round her, started again while the troop in their play circled around him. Once again the mare came at him, and this time seizing the mantle that covered his burden she tore it with her teeth.

At this the eyes of Estercel opened. Hearing the noise of the many hoofs and seeing the press of horses about him and the open mouth and great teeth of the mare near to his face, he thought himself in battle, and charging at the Yellow Ford; he opened his mouth and uttered so desperate a battle-cry that his wounded throat was torn and the startled mare reared and then away and off with her at a mad gallop. Tamburlaine knew the shout and rejoiced in it; he forgot his weariness and broke anew into a gallop which took him right on to Benburb, and the Yellow Ford itself, where the very air smelt to him of battle; when on that great day two years back he had seen the Blackwater run red. The morning was already bright as he crossed it and came dripping and staggering up the further bank. He was nearly spent now; no horse but himself could have done the distance and in the time; worn out though he was, his heart was encouraged within him; he knew his ground now, he had fought all over these fields; there were the pits into which Marshal Bagnal's horsemen had fallen but half filled up.

Leaving Benburb behind him he made on; the mountains were before him. Far, far away he descried the flat top of Slieve Gallion.

But a great need was on him for rest; the bones of his master were hard and weighed heavily; they galled his back and the tight bands oppressed him; moreover, Estercel appeared to have slipped on one side and his

head was hanging down; since he had uttered his battle shout he had not spoken or moved again.

It was about half-past five in the morning when he entered the yard of the old farm-house of Tyhallon. There they had stopped and he had eaten corn on his way up.

No one was in the farm-yard as he entered, so he stood patiently. And what a sight the pair of them made! All about them was the windy brightness of the morning, the young May green of the bushes shone with clear light; like the laughter of a thousand fairies the birds sang in the trees. The little house was well tended and kept. Away in the meadows sounded the call of a girl's voice gathering in her cows, "Soo! soo! soo! soo!" as sweet as any of the birds.

And there in the yard was this fearful pair. Everywhere else that one looked there was youth and joy and the resurrection of spring. Here alone was seen the cruel secret of mortality, pain, and corruption. Over both of them black wings seemed to hover and the morning was less bright because they stood there. Patiently the horse stood, his forelegs spread apart, his nose nearly on the ground so heavily did his head hang down. His eye was red and glazed; foam and blood dripped from his mouth. His white coat was rough and bristled and stained besides with a hundred travel stains, red oozings from the iron springs of the Fews, grey mud of the limestone hills, black mud of the bogs, yellow clay of the low bottoms.

As for the man on his back, the rough head with its dark and matted hair, once golden, hung down by the horse's shoulder; the lower part of the face covered with a young beard, the mouth was open and the swollen

tongue was visible; the large skeleton hands hung down too and shook to the breathing of the horse; under the stains on the face was a pallor like that of death and the great eyepits appeared vacant of any eyes.

There was not a sound to be heard but the panting of the horse and the sound of the feet of the cows coming nearer and of the girl's voice calling to them still.

The heart of Tamburlaine took a little comfort as he listened to the pleasant song: perhaps now they would take his dear master's heavy bones from off his back and find him clean straw on which he might lie down before his heart burst in him altogether.

The cows came in, but seeing the strange apparition would have backed out again, but the girl behind drove them in and followed them. She was a young girl, very slim, with a brown face and pale gold hair and a willow switch in her hand. When she saw the horse she uttered a cry and ran forward and looked straight into the face of Estercel. A fearful scream broke from her mouth, another and another. Out of the house a man and a woman came running who also looked and uttered loud cries. The woman tossed her brown arms above her, uttering loud and terrible death-wails. The horse was distracted: he had looked for kind and friendly treatment and not for yellings in his weary ears. He recovered himself and lifted up his head; he gathered himself up together and backed down the yard. He had an old dislike of cows; also he was angry at these people. Moreover, he had been his own master for a good while now, and these were not the ways for him. He was used to being treated with respect. And he was not so spent but that he had some pride in him still. For all the way he had come had been of his own free

will. He had drunk of the rivers that he had crossed and eaten the young grasses now and then. No whip or spur had touched him, he could breathe when or how he liked, only his own strong desire had driven him on. His heart was not broken, his spirit was still stout. He backed away from the fools who screamed at him and the shoving cows. The man ran forward to seize his bridle, but Tamburlaine would not be touched; he showed his teeth and laid back his ears, he sidled to the door of the yard, the man still following and speaking softly now while the women held their breath. A moment more and he was out of the yard and sidling away over the field. Yet still he longed for help and stood wistfully looking at the pleasant house.

"Father," said the girl, "leave me to deal with him. That's no common horse; I had a great talk with him and Owen Joy not a month of mornings ago. Give me a drop of poteen quick, and, mother, a sup of milk in the pail till I see is the young man dead all out."

Hastily the mother drew some milk from the nearest cow and with that and a leather bottle of spirit in her hand the girl left the yard and approached the horse. When she got near, she curtsied and spoke respectfully.

"I mind your name well, sir. Tamburlaine, it is. I don't want to lay a hand upon you at all, but for the love of God let me see is there anything I can do for the poor young man upon your back?"

The anger of Tamburlaine faded away: this was more the sort of thing he was used to. The girl came gently forward and set down the pail by him, then went forward to Estercel. The height of the horse made it difficult for her to reach, but standing on tip-toe she

managed to lift up the head of Estercel and lay it on the horse's neck. In fear and horror she chafed his forehead and hands, speaking kindly to him and the horse as she did so. Standing on tip-toe and using the tin dipper, she poured the warm milk down the throat of Estercel. The cavernous eyepits opened and the eyes of a dying man looked at her. At this moment the girl's father, who had thought it would be a fine thing to come up behind her and take the horse unawares, suddenly ran out and snatched at the rein; but Tamburlaine was too quick for him; he jerked up his head and kicked out with one heel; then, wheeling, he was off again in a sprawling gallop on legs that felt like four tree stumps beneath him—past Dungannon, where stood Tyrone's great castle on its limestone rock, guarding within it the mystic crown of Phoenix feathers. On towards the mountains and home. Every foot of ground was known to him now, every bush and every path. Ten miles more; could he do it with half-blind eyes and a ton's weight of hard bones upon his back?

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MESSENGER

HEAVENLY spring lay like a green mantle over the woods about Ardhoroe. A short while ago, and all was winter brown; now the last year's birds were so amazed at the new green bowers of this, the first spring they had seen, that they sang themselves silly from morning till night.

Early, early in the dawning light the old and the sick were on their way to Ardhoroe, hobbling and groaning along the wood paths, coming to Sabia to be cured.

When Sabia rose at six of the clock on the 9th of May and looked out of her window, lo and behold, there they all were, ranged along the courtyard wall, waiting for salvation.

The custom was to serve them first with good oaten cakes and wooden bowls of milk as they sat by the wall, and then to call them in one by one to the hall where Sabia sat in the great chair, her nurse standing beside her.

The first to come in was a hearty stout woman with red hair, her head slewed round on one side in a most unnatural position.

"The Virgin be merciful, Molly O'Halloran," said Sabia sweetly, "what's the matter with your neck?"

"I've got a blasht," said Molly hoarsely. "There's a ratching in my spine and a ketching in me ribs: and the saints know what it is that has tied down my head to my shoulder. O'Halloran himself has to turn me in my bed for I never could rise without assistance."

"Indeed, ma'am," said Nurse Phaire, popping from behind Sabia's chair, "it's a bad blast you have and no mistake. But we'll soon cure you of that. Rowl yourself in red, ma'am, and I'll give you a bottle of the white cure to rub well in. Haven't I the good rhyme for that:

" Rub her in white
And rowl her in red
For twice the sun's round
Let her lie in her bed."

"The people are saying," said Molly, "that the Lady Sabia has the fortunate touch; now if she was to touch my neck maybe she might loosen the blast off me."

"With all the heart I have," said Sabia, and rising at once she went to the woman and gently rubbed the stiff neck with her kindly delicate hands. Believe it or not, the woman went out with her head straight upon her shoulders, uttering loud praises: but then *you* have not felt the flower-like touch of the hands of Sabia.

The next to come in was a little wizened man about sixty, with a face the colour of a gold watch.

"Saints of God!" cried Nurse Phaire, "what's turned ye? It's a meadow-frog you have the appearance of and no other creature."

The man sat down, panting, and looking proudly about him. "Ay, that's what they're all saying," says he. "I'm the very colour of the net of lemons that came into the country last year on the Spanish ship."

"What's turned you such a colour at all?" said Nurse Phaire suspiciously. "It's in the blood it is. Is your heart took bitter at anything? Has some misfortune come upon you, or has some one done you an ill turn?"

The little yellow man twisted and rolled his hands one upon another; his chin trembled and shook, but he uttered not a word.

"Come," said Sabia, "we are all friends here. If there is anything on your mind, say it out. We cannot help you unless we know your full complaint."

"All my children are taken against me, all," said the little yellow man at last, trembling, as he spoke, from head to foot. "They're all wishing me dead. That they may broil for it in hell!" and he began to scream and splutter.

Nurse Phaire went round and patted his back. "Easy, easy, now," she said. "Tell it all out, there's a good man. Ye'll be better after; but mind your manners before a daughter of the O'Neils."

Rocking himself, with suppressed curses, out came the long tale; his married son had taken his plough, his darling Ellen had married against his will; his young son Dominic had gone away for a soldier, he being unwilling; and now Bride was going against him, his darling, his youngest.

Sabia looked on him with sad pity while he relieved himself.

Nurse Phaire shook her head muttering:

"Yellow
Forsaketh his fellow,"

then got and looked in the drawer of a tall oak chest. Presently she came over with a piece of yellow cloth in her hand.

"Hang this," she said, "in your window, look on it when the morning sun smites it. Go abroad in the sunshine, not when the weather is dark. Make a tea of

tansy and camomile flowers and the yellow marigold. Make your confession to the priest, and sign the cross upon heart and mouth, and the yellow fires of your blood will die down."

The man listened attentively and took the cloth, saying, "God reward you."

Sabia went and took his hand: "I will come myself and see you and your daughter Bride, and decide between you," she said. "Pray you to God that He may make you better to be loved."

Hanging his head with a subdued look the little man hobbled out of the room.

He went and there came a sound of shuffling feet in the passage and a woman's voice saying: "Howld up now, darlin'. Howld up your head."

Two women entered, supporting between them an emaciated but still beautiful lad. His feet trailed behind him, his white face hung mournfully down. Sabia rose from her chair and ran forward to him.

"John Joy," said she, "whatever is come to you?" and she helped to place him in a seat. The boy looked wistfully up at her with sea-blue eyes, then down again at his coat of white homespun which he stroked and folded in his fingers.

"So runs the wave upon the shore, fold on fold," he was idly thinking. "And why can't they let me alone?"

Sabia went back to her chair; she was pale as death with pity. Nurse Phaire stooped down and whispered in her ear: "The sign's on him, Miss Sabia. Do you see the sign upon him? We can do naught."

But the mother of the boy was talking away: "The very day he was taken I can tell you; it was in the

autumn and nothing would serve him but he would go down by the bogs; and he told me himself when he was got as far as the water meadow, a cold wind blew out of the ground upon him, and he's been not to say well ever since. But he's better to-day, aren't you, Johnnie, my lamb?"

But the boy only sighed; to himself he seemed to be piling up pebbles on the shore by a blue sea, while the others thought he was only playing with his fingers on his knees. The tears ran down Sabia's face.

"Indeed, ma'am," said Nurse Phaire, "it's not safe to be abroad these times. There's them goin' about that could wish a stick or a straw into your backbone, to torment you till ye die."

"Holy Virgin!" cried the woman, casting up hands and eyes: and "Is it as bad as that with him, Mrs. Phaire?" cried the mother in anguish. "Sure I thought he was lookin' a bit better to-day or I wouldn't have troubled to bring him along. Arra, what will I do for him, now tell me, Miss Sabia, my child, don't I see the blessed holy tears of sympathy upon your face? Consider, Miss Sabia, and the right cure will come to you. Look at him, my beautiful one, perfect in every limb, great at the learning; is the hope of our house to die?"

But Sabia could only stutter: words she had none. The old nurse came forward and laid her wrinkled hand on the boy's clammy forehead and felt the damp wisps of his honey-coloured hair.

"Ah, dear," she said, "the last of them that could save him is gone from Ireland, gone five-twenty years ago: the old skill is no more and much do I grieve there is no doctor's house of the ancient sort to put him into. It was they that were wise and had the great invention.

Four big walls had the doctor's house of old and a door in each wall; whichever way the wind blew, on that side the door was shut and on that only. The house itself was built over a running stream. Day and night the clean water ran through the house carrying the sickness away with it."

"I would put him in a place like that, God knows, could I find it," said the woman, "but failing the house with the water and the doors, what will I do for him?"

"I'll tell you that," said the nurse. "But I'll not hide it from ye, ma'am, that he's very near death, unless God wills to save him. Let the daughter of Ardhroe make the sign of the cross on his forehead and his breast. Take him home easy. Have you a horse for him?"

"We have an ass," said the woman, "a quiet animal."

"Take him home and lay him down where he likes best to be, himself. Don't stir him or be talking to him at all, but just to give him a sup of new milk and all the water he asks for. And pay attention now, for this is the powerful cure. The first moth that comes in the house to-night to warm itself at the fire, catch that, roll it in a piece of fat bacon, and bury it away. That's the way ye'll catch his sickness and destroy it, if it's God's will."

Sabia went to the boy, and kindly and reverently made the sign of the cross on brow and breast. He scarcely lifted his head; he had almost taken leave of the visible world: time was nothing to him; his soul sat already by the shore of the seas of the infinite, waiting to hear a voice. Sabia sat still in her chair, while he was carried out in the arms of a strong man. An intolerable sense of grief and woe had of a sudden come upon her; a cold hand clutched her heart and a cold wind

out of the future blew around her, chilling her to the bone, till she shivered and shook.

She heard voices about her and at length dragged herself from her abstraction and looked up to meet the eyes of a queer-looking baby that sat on a woman's knee directly in front of her.

The baby was a very large child about twelve months old, with a head as big as a man's, and quite bald. It had large pale eyes that stared out of its head and apparently saw nothing. It wore a tartan dress of black and red, and sat perfectly still on the knee of the bonny foolish-looking young woman that held it.

Anxious and worried she seemed as well as foolish; her mouth was open, but she lacked courage to speak.

"What's the matter with the child," said Nurse Phaire, "or is it yourself that's ailing?"

"Not the least touch of disease is on either of the pair of us. Glory be to God," said the young woman. "But I'm harished: I'm demented."

"God save you, woman," answered Nurse Phaire, "and how's that?"

"I'll ask ye to look at this boy, ma'am. Did you ever see a finer child? barring that he has no hair on his head and can't speak and hasn't a tooth in his jaws, above or below; wouldn't any one on earth that had a heart for children call him a beauty?"

"He's very large for his age," said Sabia with a feigned cheerfulness, as the boy directed his pale eyes upon her.

"Well, then," said Nurse Phaire, "I grant you all that you say of him and welcome. But what's the matter with you at the end of it?"

The woman drew up nearer to Sabia, and spoke in a cold whisper.

"It's this way, beautiful mistress of the house," said she. "The mother of him that's married to me says all's not right with him. She says he's one of *them*, you know who. She says ice won't freeze him nor water drown him nor fire burn him. And I'm in dread she'll try her experiments when my back's turned. She'll murder him if she gets the chance. Indeed she's a terrible old woman. She sits by the fire and looks at the child till I think she'll look him silly. Faith, I think it's herself has looked the hair off his head and the teeth out of his mouth."

Sabia saw by the young woman's face, which was now red, now pale, that her uneasiness was great. "Don't go back home," she said. "Stay here with your boy."

"Wait then," said Nurse Phaire, "it's better that we should make sure that all's right with the child and that he is no changeling. Let me tell you this, ma'am. Not one of the sort can abide the look of a pot of eggshells cooking on the fire. If he's one of them he'll speak out. Mary," she called, "go and break a dozen of eggs and bring me the shells of them and a pot till I make some soup."

"The shells, ma'am?" said the girl appearing at the door.

"Ay; the shells," said Nurse Phaire solemnly

"Holy Trinity," murmured the girl as she vanished.

The pot boiled soon on the great hearth and one by one the nurse threw in the eggs-hells. The child remained unmoved, staring at the fire while every one anxiously regarded him. Neither laughter nor expostulation came from his lips. Encouraged by the silence, he turned his face to his mother's breast, stuck his thumb in his mouth, and peacefully slumbered.

"There's not a sign of ill-will in him towards the egg-shells," said Nurse Phaire. "Miss Sabia, dear, let us see will he scunner at the prayer-book? Will I fetch the big one?"

When the nurse came back holding the prayer-book with the heavily embossed covers, the mother lifted up the child, shook him, and bounced him heavily down again on her knee.

He uttered a sigh, withdrew his thumb, and opened his eyes. Sabia drew near with the open prayer-book in her hands; a beautiful page shone bright there with gold and many colours; the Mother of God sat with her son on her knee and the angels about her. At the sight, a smile spread over the solemn face of the child, he uttered an inarticulate joyous babbling sound, and held his arms out to the book.

The women crowded round exclaiming and praising the boy.

"There's a wise man to come of that child," said one.

"He has a grand considering head," said Nurse Phaire.

"How soft is his cheek!" said Sabia.

As they all stood so about the boy, tenderly exclaiming on his wisdom, a noise was heard at the door; there was loud talking, a moment's delay; then a young man burst into the hall. The sunlight streamed in with him and showed him deadly pale. He panted and struggled for breath.

Sabia sprang forward. "Speak!" she said. "Tell it out. What is it?"

The man's chest heaved as though the walls of it would crack. "They're comin'!" he gasped. "They're comin'! Oh, God in heaven! what a sight!"

CHAPTER XXV

BACK TO ARDHOROE

THERE are many sorts of love: in every heart it burns with a different lustre. In some it shines like a wee spark lit for a moment and soon burnt out; there are no sweet woods and fragrant oils there on which the essential flame can feed. In some it burns like a steady lamp before a shrine: in some again like a tall flame whose singing drowns all other harmonies.

Sabia's love for Estercel was at once steady as the lamp, tall and aspiring as the singing flame: such a love is cleansing; it sweeps out all baser fires, and it runs in the blood like wine and steadies the heart.

When the lad Murrough came in with his message, Sabia's second self at once knew all that he had to tell her. In these last days she had had many previsions of misfortune, only this actual one was more bitter than those that had gone before.

She went up to Murrough and took him by the sleeve.

"Is it Estercel?" she said.

"Ay," said he, "it's himself sure enough! But it's a dead man on a dead horse I've seen," and he burst into tears.

"Where?" said Sabia as she shook him by the sleeve.

"Coming here by the Dungannon Road," said he.

Like a flash Sabia was off and every man, woman, and child in and about the place was after her. Down the hill she ran, over the bridge and past the wood, and

at the turning she saw a slow-moving crowd coming towards her. In some ways it resembled a funeral train, but in this case the dead man came first on a staggering horse; and no followers of a funeral ever wore such faces of horror and grief.

Fleet as Sabia was, young Murrough, who was Estercel's own horse-boy, outran her. Tamburlaine, all blind now, was still staggering on, but when he heard Murrough's shout and felt under his feet the very sound and tread of home he stopped and began to waver and totter and his hind-quarters to give beneath him. "I can die now," he said to himself in his dying mind; "I have brought him home." The astonishing thing about the horse was how his flesh and his substance and his youth had vanished away in one night. In the evening he had been young and comely, round of haunch and back; in the morning he had come in old and gaunt.

"Hold him up!" shouted Murrough; "Hold him up, the hero!" and he ran and put his shoulder to his neck. "Keep up a minute, darling, just a minute more, till we take the poor soul off your back!"

Two more men ran forward and held up his hind-quarters while the women shrieked and cried on Mary and the saints.

"That's what it is to go out into the bitter world," said one.

"Wouldn't you say they'd come back straight out of hell?" said another.

"Ah, cease shouting, some of you," said Murrough, "and take the young man down from off his back."

At this moment Sabia ran in, and when they saw her, they became silent and drew back, standing circle-wise

and bending forward in their pity. It was young life looking upon death and youth suddenly grown old.

Sabia looked and looked and yet could not believe what she saw, the open mouth, the grey face, the defilement, the vermin-plagued sores. Paler and paler she grew: was it Estercel? or was it not? It was, and he was dead. Unlike the other women she never uttered a sound, but raised her head and looked about her; then beckoned: "Dermot, go you to the horse's shoulder quick. Murrough, come you here and take him down."

With her own fingers she began to undo the buckles and straps; a second man stepped forward; Murrough took the head and shoulders, the other man the knees: they lifted him; as they did so Sabia saw marks on the folded horse-cloth.

"Lay him on the other side," said she, and when he was on the ground they saw that the hip-bone had worked through the skin.

A shout from the men drew their eyes away: Tamburlaine was now tottering to his fall: like some gallant ship that dips and founders and sinks he went down with a groan, for his work was done and he knew himself at home. There they lay, the two heroes, a few feet apart and one was as bad as the other. Murrough was distracted between them: but seeing that all the women and most of the men made a circle round Estercel, he stayed with the horse. Unfolding the pad from his back he spread it over the trembling creature; he ran and fetched water and washed the red foam from face and mouth; then mixed more with spirit from a leather bottle: Dermot held up the horse's neck while he poured it down his throat. Then he sat with the large miserable head on his knee, chafing the bony

forehead and neck, calling to him, talking love words, praying him to come back to life, while Dermot rubbed the strained and trembling limbs.

The circle round Estercel opened out in silence as old Nurse Phaire came hobbling in; when she saw the two prostrate creatures who had gone out so gallant and so young a horror seized her. She tottered in and looked down on Estercel, bending lower and still lower, going down on her knees, and staring with gaping mouth as though not believing what her eyes had told her. Then she rose up and throwing up her arms she began the death chant of the O'Neils.

Now as the old woman occupied the position of family doctor, the raising of the death chant meant that she considered Estercel was past hope. The first note of it struck like a knife to the heart of Sabia: she flew at her nurse and shook her with passion.

"Stop!" she said, "stop and shut your mouth. Look here, woman devoid of sense. See this hand," and she held up the long helpless limb. "Look, old woman, the charm is there yet," and she showed the ring tightly encircling the swollen finger. "He is not dead and that I know. Leave your foolish canticles. To the work now and bring him back to life or you shall answer it to me."

There was a desperate strength of passion in Sabia that hushed down all resistance and objections; and after all, was not she the mistress?

Muttering, the nurse stooped down and laid a hand upon his heart.

"If he is alive," said she, "then life and death can co-exist, and death can bring forth life."

"It shall," said Sabia, "and now. Run, Owen and

Michael, run as you have never run before and bring back the carrier."

The two fleetest runners started out; the May wind blowing behind could not overtake them; you could hardly have counted two-score before they were back again. Those of the standers-by who wore their mantles laid them on the carrier which was just a broad board with four handles.

In deep silence the body of the young man was placed on the carrier and covered over. The news of the arrival of a dead man (and that, the young Estercel) brought home by his dying horse had got abroad; men and women kept hurrying in by twos and threes, who, as they joined the circle, fell respectfully silent.

Four bearers took the handles, Sabia and her nurse walked behind, and the rest followed in a long weeping train.

Sabia was full of bitterness. She hated the little birds on the bushes who kept on singing as they passed. She had looked to see the youth returning with glory upon his head and fame in his right hand. She could not bear to see him so abashed before all the people. Where had been his match for stature, strength, and courage? And there he was lying, all doubled up and hideous on a board, brought down in the very qualities that had been their delight. It was not that her pride was mortified, but that she felt for him in his physical humiliation.

Sabia could not know the part he had played nor how nobly his integrity had upheld him. She could not realise how pure was the heart that had almost ceased to beat. His position looked like defeat, yet, had they but known, it was more really triumphal than

the return of a conqueror. How many are there that come back to the sound of trumpets who hide beneath their gorgeousness a stained memory and hold out a defiled right hand? The rags and misery of Estercel with their deep appeal to the final judgment were more truly heroic. The scarlet of the conqueror is poor bravery beside the invisible garment of the pure soul.

Like the lark's song in heaven the excellence of the inward greatness rises up from rags and indigence and triumphs in a purer atmosphere, unmindful of the earth, accusing our gross understandings and cold hearts.

CHAPTER XXVI

NURSE TENDERS

LUCKY it was for Estercel that he had an old woman and a young to doctor him, the tenderness of the one to counteract the experience and ancient knowledge of the other. From the first, Sabia would not be sent away, the intensity of her feeling knew neither squeamishness nor fatigue.

They laid him down in a recess of the old hall; a chosen number of helpers amounting to perhaps a score were allowed in. The only man among them was the cattle-doctor, and he had small chance of being heard. Soft linen cloths were got ready and a cauldron of hot water. His rags were ripped off him. Stones were placed in the fire to heat and, wrapped in woollen cloths, were laid about him. His hair was shaved close to his head. With immense cleverness and quickness these women, so skilled in life and death, washed and cleansed the wounded body, chattering the while like a wood full of magpies and jays; all the while Sabia hung over her charge, and "Oh, take care!" and "Oh, gently!" she cried, and "Oh, keep him warm, keep him warm!" for the old women would make a show of him, for his body was full of pricks and wounds that puzzled them and they could not make out why the ends of his fingers and toes were sore. Did he dig with them to get out of prison, may be? And his skin was cut where the bands had been and his flesh all worn away and the hip-bone laid bare.

If the women had had their way they would have had the whole countryside in: as it was, the courtyard was crowded and all along the hillside the people were sitting. Now and then one of the women would go out and speak to them and there would be a rush to hear what she had to say. Every man was questioning his neighbour: "Where were Owen and his men?" "Where had the two come from?" "Had the horse found his way alone?" "Would the young man live and not die?"

In the hall the whole battery of Nurse Phaire's simples had been placed on the table where the inquisitive smelled at and tasted them.

"Bring the salt and fir-tree essence," said Nurse Phaire. "Let them be rubbed well into his wounds. There is nothing equal to them for cleaning sores."

"Ay, ay," said most of the old women, "it's the best thing you can have."

"Do you remember," said a woman commonly called Catherine the Saint, "how young Shawn got the kick of a horse in his shin-bone and his father rubbed in salt and fir-tree essence, and the sore spread and he suffered a year's agony?"

"That was not the fault of the remedy," said Nurse Phaire; "the fault was in the nature of the kick."

"It is no use your talking," said Sabia, looking up from where she kneeled by Estercel, rubbing patiently his forehead and broad chest, "no use at all to talk; I will not allow such remedies to be used."

Nurse Phaire loudly cleared her throat and bustled round the table looking at her collection of herbs.

"Gunpowder," said old Ronnat, "they say if you rub in gunpowder the wound is sure to heal."

"Indeed," said Catherine, "I saw Phelim O'Donell after they tried it on him and he was twisting like a slug in the salt."

"That was good: that was wholesome," said old Ronnat. "What else was it but that the virtue of the gunpowder had commenced to work?"

"Well, and I will not have that either," said Sabia, looking up with her face pale and drawn and her large eyes wild in her head; a whole hour they had been at work and he had given no sign; not a sigh or a flutter of the eyelids; only now and then Sabia believed she caught a faint fluttering of the heart. Her despairing glance met the eye of Catherine who answered with a smile. Now Catherine was a tall and gaunt old woman, with a bony face of a yellow-brown colour, whitish hair, and a smile of heavenly sweetness. It ran upon her countenance like sunlight on clear water, spilling grace and loveliness over figure as well as face.

Sabia believed instinctively in the power of the touch; she believed in her own touch and she had heard that Catherine was a famous rubber.

"Come you here, Catherine," she said. "There is life in him, I know, but I cannot reach it. I am afraid he will slip away. Take my place and I will go to his feet."

Catherine, the wise old mother, sat her down upon the floor and took the head and shoulders upon her knees; with her large powerful arms she cherished him, blew upon his mouth, rubbed and worked the arms, called softly in his ear, clapped his hands. She asked for spirits, and wet his lips and chafed his forehead and breast above the heart. She called for hot woollen cloths and wrapped him round; not for her own son

could she have striven more earnestly. Sabia sat at the feet warming them in her hands; always her eyes tried to meet Catherine's who avoided them.

Half an hour more went by and the slow tears of despair began to drip from Sabia's eyes when suddenly a shock went through her; a slight quiver ran along the limbs; she could have shrieked in her excitement, she looked at Catherine and Catherine smiled and put a finger on her lip, glancing as she did so at the noisy group about the table. The cattle-doctor sat by the fire drinking poteen out of a glass; he saw Catherine's gesture and winked back, putting down his glass and rubbing his hands together.

Another movement ran through the limbs and another; the eyelids fluttered and sank, fluttered and rose, and the weary eyes looked out. Sabia left the feet and came to him: but the eyelids closed again. She knelt down by him and took hold of his two hands. In all his wanderings Estercel was conscious of that friendly clasp.

Now for an hour and more he suffered all the trouble of a drowning man. For a little time he would come to himself and see the dark rafters of the roof above him and the many shining eyes and pale faces that watched around; then the roaring of the unshored tides would sound in his ears and he would sink away into his dream. For his senses had been clean gone; had they not recalled him he had never thought another earthly thought, never felt another bodily pang. He had found his place in eternity and miserable and cold was his return to life.

On his second awakening he uttered a groan which startled all the hall. The cattle-doctor rose up and came to his side; the women flew round screaming and

ejaculating holy words, but Nurse Phaire held up her hand.

"I will have no noise," said she. "There are three things required by those who are escaping from death, cold water, silence, and the hand of a friend. There is sense in that eye. He will live now."

Half an hour later Nurse Phaire went out of the hall; those who remained within soon heard a great noise and shouting; Estercel's eyes questioned Sabia.

"The people are glad you are come home," she said softly: he closed his eyes and a more easy look settled on his face.

An hour more and Sabia left her place: Estercel had sunk into a sleep and she could hear him breathe. The cattle-doctor and three old women sat round him.

Sabia went to her nurse who was pounding drugs in a mortar at the far end of the hall.

"Nurse, dear," she whispered in her ear, "I am afraid of old Ronnat; she has got up very close to him and I am afraid she will be rubbing gunpowder into him."

"I will have her buried in Aughanee Bog with nothing but her head out if she touches him with a finger," said the nurse.

"Look at her now," said Sabia. "I want her sent away from him."

Sure enough, the old woman was slily raising the coverings of the bed.

Nurse Phaire went directly to her and old Ronnat drew back her hand and sat hastily up with a false smile upon her face.

"Ronnat," said Nurse Phaire, with a manner of deep respect, "a person of years and experience is required below at the barn. A bullock has been killed and many

cakes of wheat and oaten meal are being baked, that all the people may be decently fed and entertained."

"A thousand blessings on the mistress of the house and the liberal hand," said old Ronnat, getting up with the greatest alacrity and hobbling out of the hall.

When she was gone Sabia pressed close to the side of her nurse; she laid her head on her shoulder and wept long and bitterly.

"Oh, never, never have I seen such a sight! What have they been doing to him? He cannot live—a man cannot be so changed and yet live."

Nurse Phaire patted her head kindly. "Cease crying and trust in your old nurse," she said.

"I will," said Sabia, "if you will promise not to hurt him with salt or any other form of torment."

"Very well," said the nurse; "I will do all to please you; but do you be of a smooth temper and not get in a passion. A lady must keep her face whatever happens. Now listen and well attend. Those wounds are not clean and I have well washed them with the liquor of the ground ivy. Now of this pounded wych hazel bark, and well tried lard, I am making a healing ointment which I will spread over the smaller wounds; with this piece of transparent skin thoroughly washed in the juice of the nettle I am going to cover his hip that it may not be rubbed. With such a wound as that it will not be long before fever will come upon him; for that I have ready a decoction of goose-grass, betony, and other herbs. As for his sore mouth, I intend presently with the help of God to catch a toad by moonlight, the head of which I shall cause him to suck."

"That, nurse," said Sabia firmly, "I will not permit."

"There now," said Nurse Phaire reproaching her, "what did I tell you? You are angry again directly!"

Since the day of the coming of Tyrone there had not been such excitement anywhere in the north as was provided by the return of Estercel; the news of it, and of the baking and roasting, spread far and wide and drew more and greater crowds. There was a continual coming and going. To and fro, although the fair promise of the morning had not held good and a light rain was falling, the people travelled between the courtyard of the castle, the hillside, the haggard where the feast was preparing, and the spot by the wood side where Tamburlaine still lay. Crowds surrounded the horse, praising him, speculating, prophesying. It was a fine treat for them to watch his quivering limbs and helpless head and wonder what were the causes that had brought him to this. And every man there proposed his own system of treatment and told it aloud to Murrough the horse-boy.

For Murrough never left him, but sat beside him in the rain rubbing him and talking to him encouragingly. Seeing how the rain wetted the horse-cloths and chilled the trembling beast, the men who stood round fetched stakes and the boughs of trees and soon ran up a rough three-sided shelter about him where he lay.

The will and the spirit are strange things. Tamburlaine would have died then and there had any man forced him to that ride; but it was a burden he had taken upon himself; there was no hurt to his soul; rather he felt a dim inner sense of joy and satisfaction. The smell of the home that he loved was in those wide nostrils that crushed down the little herbs and grasses, and one of the voices he loved best was continually in his

ear saying things that he perfectly understood as he lay in his exhaustion. The close stable that had vexed him, the stone walls, the paved ways, the many faces, and the noises that he hated had all vanished away; therefore his contented heart was nurse to his suffering body and bore it up through the long day.

Towards nightfall Estercel awoke; his eyes were steadier; the mists were clearing away and the floating outlines growing firm. Seeing his more sensible look Nurse Phaire came to his side; he took some drink from her hand and she looked to his wounds. When that was done she spread over him a gorgeous covering of crimson cloth embroidered in a Spanish convent. Her helpers made up a mighty fire of logs and two men with flaming torches took their places, one at his head and one at his feet: Sabia sat by the hearth in the great chair, her nurse at her back. The doors of the hall were opened to their full extent of seven feet, and a messenger sent to the people who waited without.

The door space was filled with the twilight and the sweet scent and sound of the rain. Up through it came the people in an orderly line. Stooping without the door, each one pulled off his shoes of hide and on bare and silent feet stole round the hall; in silence each one approached the low bed and took one glance at the grey thin face, the bandaged head and wrapped-up hands that lay on the gorgeous counterpane, the half-open mouth that had as yet spoken no word. Each one then stooped on his knee, kissed a corner of the drapery, then rising in silence stepped away to the door; now one would whisper a blessing, one would cross himself, one would drop down a tear, and more than one went out sobbing.

To Estercel, it was like the wildest dream he ever dreamed. Familiar faces floated by him, bright for a moment in the torchlight, wearing an unfamiliar look. Why did some of those faces work and twist as they looked at him? Why did the tears run on some cheeks? Where had he been that they all bid him, "Welcome home." They wearied him at length; he closed his eyes and presently, feeling again the motion of the wild horse beneath him, he sank away in a half-sleep.

When the last of the long stream had left the hall a chosen watch of fifteen persons was set, half to sleep and the rest to guard. About midnight, the fever of Estercel came upon him like a clap. That one glimpse of the visible world, unstable as it had been, was the last he was to have for many a long day. The poison of the prison had entered deep into him and infected his blood; not all the sweetness of the air and waters of freedom had been able to wash it out.

More fortunate was Tamburlaine lying in his shelter away down by the trees. If Estercel had fifteen nurses, he had a score. They built a fire about thirty paces from the shelter and sat round it in their mantles, making nothing of the rain. Their wise heads were waiting for the rise of the fever, warning that the mischief in the lungs they expected had set in.

Every now and then they would turn in the direction of the prostrate horse, on whose strange outline heaped with coverings the starting flames shed broken yellow lights. The horse looked worse than the man; a man lies down and his limbs fall into positions of natural grace. But a horse in extremity is a painful sight; that bulk of body, those inflexive limbs have an uneasy look, a stupid look, as though some prehistoric beast

without intelligence was there smitten down. In addition to that, Tamburlaine's four legs were bandaged by a cunning hand from hoof to shoulder and stretched out straight and stiff and uncomely as four broom-handles.

Now and then a man would get up from his place and going to the horse would stoop to feel the pulse in his pastern above the hoof—but no fever was there, only the weak slow pulse of exhaustion. A heap of straw had been thrown down on which his head rested, Murrough the horse-boy sitting beside, his head sometimes nodding on his breast, but for the most part pretty straight on his shoulders. A strange feeling ran through the minds of them all and was passed on in whispers from one to the other that the lives of horse and man hung on the same thread; that if that pulse of life, now so faint and weak, ceased then and there in the horse, so in the man it would fail also and they two go out of life together.

A short while after midnight a warm drink of milk and oaten meal mixed in water was got ready at the fire, and two or three men helping with a wooden funnel it was got down, the greater part of it.

Thereafter all was silence till the early dawn; nothing was heard but the rustle of a little mouse that ran about and played in the dead leaves at the edge of the wood. The light moths, the star-worshippers, all their thousand fairy feathers wetted in the rain, fluttered out of the wood, enchanted by the new strange light, and the men by the fire watched them fall down, killed by the heat. Happy for them the stars are hung so high.

Before the light of dawn was strong enough to paint in the true colours of things, while the bushes were still

black heaps and the blue mantle of Dermot was grey, the birds awoke. Though they filled the air with their wildest harpings, the tired men slept on. Murrough, too, slept within the shelter. So there was no one to see the ear of Tamburlaine rise up on his head. He was better; the life was coming back to him. Moreover, his other ear was to the ground and he had heard something, far away as yet. The ear on his head pricked up and listened. Yes, there was the tread, four-fold, of Eliza, the brown mare that he loved; and there was the double tread of Owen, with whom he was something offended; and the others were with them; but how their feet trailed along; the men were walking with the horses. Tamburlaine forgot his abject state and laughed in himself to think how he had distanced them. Nearer and nearer they came and still the weary men slept.

Now the wind had been from the north-west, so that the open side of the shelter faced south, away from it, and Owen and his men could see from far away the hut where no hut had ever been and the group of men lying in all attitudes about the still smoking fire. They stopped and consulted together, then understanding nothing of it came cautiously on.

Then at last Murrough awoke; he dashed out of the shelter, with a shout he awoke the sleeping men, then away down the path with him and the rest were not long behind him. It is not often that two parties meet in a place together that have more news for each other. Owen had the whole great story to tell; the watchers had the story of the return to give in exchange; there was between them enough material of conversation to last the whole of the summer; but like spendthrifts they all talked at once, blurting out the whole of the

news as fast as possible and all together, each one racing to be the first with it. At length the weary Owen desired to behold Tamburlaine with his own eyes; leaning on Murrough's arm, he came along by the wood path and reached the sad object in the shed. A great amazement in his heart (for being new come off the road he could scarcely believe that Tamburlaine had done such a feat in so short a time) and a tear in his eye he crept into the shelter; he felt the horse and found him at a fair natural heat; he felt the pulse, which was stronger now.

"He'll do," he said, "he'll do; thank God! He's made himself immortal now."

The horse heard every word; though the last one bothered him, he knew right well Owen's meaning. Half he remembered his grudge against Owen, half he forgave him. He partly opened his eye and shed a strange light out of it while a dubious grin wrinkled the corner of his mouth.

Owen drew back amazed while the crowd pressed about him.

"Oh, saints preserve us!" he cried, "did ever you see the like of that? It's himself sure enough. Holy Mother, did you see the look he gave me?"

But the eye of Tamburlaine was already shut and there he lay as innocent as a child.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SHADOW OF THE RED WOMAN

THE recovery of Tamburlaine was the matter of a minute, little more. It came about on the following evening. The horse had been restless with a twitching of his limbs, and Owen bade them strip off the bandages that he might see if the swelling of the legs had gone down.

"These legs are as good as two pair of new ones this minute," said Owen, looking them carefully up and down. "I always said there was nothing to equal that white mixture. But do you, Dermot and Murrough, give him a good rub down. It's well to be on the safe side."

And then he turned round to watch the long string of cows coming down from the milking, the sun lighting up their rounded sides, brown and red roan and white. A dismal yell caused him to turn about just in time to see the two men thrown violently to the ground and the four legs of the horse in the air at once. Down they came with a plunge and the horse's head rose and his shoulders, while Dermot and Michael ran away on all fours as fast they might. The ground under the animal was slippery because of the rains, and down he went with a frantic struggle of his four hoofs that smashed out the side of the shelter. The men shouted and ran this way and that. Owen got hold of some straw and tried to put it down for his feet, but he could not get near so furious was the kicking. Once he was up, all but; and then came down again. While a man might count

a score he lay still; next moment he was up and going in a weak canter away down the pasture, there to stand and stop, snorting, quivering, his head dizzy and his limbs but half belonging to him.

He made a strange picture in the evening light, like some creature new formed from the clay: for his side was all over mud where he had lain and his bones were starting and he straddled as he stood. But the fire of life was in him, in his high head and his wide red eye. He would not let any man come near him, and that night he went away with himself altogether; he had had enough of men and their conversations. Travelling by short stages during the night he went up into old Slieve Gallion. There the rain washed him and the young grass fed him, and the sweetness of liberty and the mountain air cured him altogether.

During that time he was not unwatched; the fame of his doings travelled far and wide and people went up the foot of Slieve Gallion to see the white speck that travelled the upper slopes or lay still at the foot of the tall grey precipice.

When he came back he was new made altogether; white and sleek and thoroughly cleansed, carrying his head high, while a strange black mare pressed close at his side. It was at night that he returned and the two were found feeding in the pasture in the morning. Though Tamburlaine was fresh and healthy, he was not yet rounded out to his full size. Owen went to him in the field with a bag of oats, but he would not let him near; he came readily enough to Murrough though and fed from his hand, with one eye on the mare who fed near by. For a week they stayed and then they both were gone together: nor had any one seen them go,

nor did any one bring news of them. The white horse seemed to have vanished away.

No one dared to tell anything of this to Estercel who now lay weak and sunk in deep dejection on his bed. His wounds were very slow to heal. Three long weeks his fever had lasted. His ravings were fallen silent; he lay, skin and bone, on his bed. June was now wearing her new robes of full splendour: up to the very doors she was strowing her flowers; sweet gales of summer's incense visited the hall. With the first red of sunrise, the mad cuckoos swept round and round the tower, calling, shouting with their clear brazen voices.

But nothing, not the summer wind with its old remembered perfume nor the low of the cattle, not the eyes of the hound that lay beside him and looked in his face, could reach at all to his heart. All his tortures, his humiliations, his sufferings, had bitten deep into his soul. He had not thought that life could be so cruel, men so atrocious. Where were Christ and His saints, where was the gentle Mother of all men, that they could let things be so hard? He felt himself stricken in the very centre of his life, his manhood was crushed within him; there he was left, the wretched prey of a handful of old women.

In black misery he lay there wasting, he who was already wasted away. Twice the charmed ring had fallen from his finger; the nurse had put it back, not daring to mention to Sabia that she had done so. For Sabia, too, was afflicted and went about like a white ghost, scarcely daring to go near to the sick man; and this ever since Owen had come home.

Owen had not been backward with his tales and his stories; Sabia knew all now; she knew the whole tale of the red-gold maid, of her beauty, her high stature, her

love for Estercel, the spells she had cast on him, her betrayal of him. Only of her repentance Owen did not tell, for he wished it to be widely understood that none but he had saved Estercel from the prison. He would not actually say what was not true, but he would nod his head and draw his lips tight together, and leave all his great deeds to be imagined.

So time went on, day after day, week after week; news came in of Essex in the south; messengers came and went; the men drilled daily. Sabia's father returned; there was coming and going in the hall; but always there was the curtain and the screen and the recess and the sick man lying with his face to the wall.

There was no one but believed that he lay under a spell. Owen said it and he must know; there were some who began to fear to go up to the castle. Murrough the horse-boy had seen a tall lady in green raiment with fiery red-gold hair that covered her like a mantle moving swiftly up the castle hill at sunset time, and as she went in at the door the sun dropped down and the light died, and Murrough fled away for his life.

Some women had seen her in the early morning light standing on the battlements of the castle with the first sunbeams on her bright hair and the birds flying round her head; but when they looked up and cried out, she faded away in a mist.

Still Estercel lay in his dark misery and weakness and the people whispered about him. "She's got him," they said. "She's laid her spell on him; she'll never go without him. She's waiting for his soul."

Sabia heard them and shuddered; day by day she grew more fearful. In the evening sometimes the women would linger down at the milking, waiting to coax the

story of yet another adventure from Owen. Then Sabia would crouch by the hearth watching the red and yellow flames darting among the logs and the shadows that danced about the hall and crept in at the door. In the fire she would see the grasping hands and the hair of the witch; the shadows were worse again; who could tell what was creeping about the bed? A moan or a sigh from the sick man or a restless movement would thrill her to the heart: then she would fly to his side, fearfully glancing this way and that, then bending anxiously over she would gaze into the grey thin face where the sunken eyes burned with one small far-away spot of flame; her own face was a picture of white despair from which Estercel received small comfort.

Many and many was the charm against witches that had been employed by Nurse Phaire and her regiment. Above his bed a large crucifix hung on the bare stone wall, also three rosaries. A large and beautiful copy of the psalms supported his head, with a hare's foot beside it. Young vervain and the leaves of the mountain ash were strewed over him and around. Many were the obnoxious potions which he had swallowed. Far and wide messengers were searching for a wise man who was said to have an adder sodden in garlic preserved in a bottle which came from Palestine; and this adder, when she got it, will he, nill he, Nurse Phaire was determined to make him eat. Last and not least, Father Machen had been sent for to Dungannon, but he had not yet arrived, though messengers were out to seek him each morning.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WHITE DAY

AFTER long periods of prosperity there often comes a time when trouble drops suddenly out of a blue sky. Hard upon the track of the first trouble others come racing so near that they seem to be linked together, hand joined to hand, just as the first clouds in the sky call up a close-packed swarm. So, too, after sorrow and suffering there comes sometimes a white day when everything is changed, as the coming of the sun changes the face of a dark world grown accustomed to the night.

One morning, awakening after a late sleep, Estercel felt in a manner refreshed. There had been rain during the night and Estercel had lain and listened in a half dream to the streaming sound; it had brought him thoughts of the movement of the long waves of the sea, of the trampling of horses' feet, of the wind in the top of a wood; the sound was in some sort a liberation; the inner man of his thought had got free and walked abroad and had had joy of it too. When on his awakening Sabia came with her white still face to his bedside, he smiled at her; she laughed back at him with a sudden colour and life as surprising as if a rose had bloomed in his hand.

About nine of the clock, when Estercel lay resting in the quiet hall, Sabia went out and sat on the hill, to listen to the singing of the larks. All about her bloomed the tiny flower of the wild thyme, the large

flower of the yellow rock-rose. Sabia picked one and laid it in her palm, a lovely thing like a burnished sun, with fashioned petals and plummy centre; as it lay it scattered a golden light in a circle upon her hand. Then of a sudden it wilted; she touched it with her fingers, it melted away; built only of sunlight and dew, it could not bear to be taken from its root. She closed her eyes and there it was again before her, the beautiful fashioned thing with its fringe of golden light.

"I will keep it alive in my memory," she said to herself. "I would not have pulled it if I had known."

She opened her eyes again and the first thing she saw was a white speck down by the wood path. Her heart beat; she looked again; it was Tamburlaine come back. He was coming quietly on and up, feeding as he came. A piercing whistle came from below: she looked, and there was Murrough whirling his arms and pointing.

Sabia got up and ran lightly down the hill; the horse came on as before, affecting not to see her. He was shining with health and freshness; he seemed to cast white lights about him as he moved. The sweep of his tail, the waving locks upon his neck, the roundness of his haunches, the light of his eye told of his recovered strength.

Sabia ran to him; he let her come while pretending not to see her. News of his master: that was what he wanted. Sabia threw her arms round his neck, calling him a hundred names of love. The horse smelled her dress, let her pat his neck a while, then began moving on and up as before. Sabia went by his side, stopping while he fed, then going on with him. Straight up the hill he came and Sabia with him, till she reached her old seat; there she sat down, full of joy to watch him.

All the people were out watching him too, shading their eyes with their hands and gazing upwards. For a time he stood feeding on the short sweet grass, then moved about uncertainly, snuffing the air and getting sideways nearer to the door of the hall.

The girl's heart leapt up in expectation; was he going in of himself? Here was something better for Estercel than a pailful of herb teas. For a while he seemed to forget himself in feeding again; then suddenly he raised his head and went leisurely to the door of the hall. Standing there he whinnied softly as he was used to do every morning when Estercel was at Ardhoroe. Sabia thought he had an answer from within for he whinnied again, then after a little hesitation, he went slowly in, his hoofs clattering on the stone, his great white sides shining strangely in the dark door space.

She flew from her place, round the house to the small side door, and up the tiny stairs to the hall gallery. On the stairs she cast off her shoes, and crept forward still as a mouse and looked below.

There stood the great horse, looking more vast and huge than ever before, at the side of the recess; Sabia could not see the bed as he was between, but the horse's head hung low and round his stooped neck she could see an arm and catch the murmur and flow of words and the sound of a sobbing breath. Then silence, while the hand and arm moved slowly up and down caressing the horse's shining neck.

Suddenly she heard a well-known word of command given in a strong voice and twice repeated; obediently the horse began to go down on his knees; then to Sabia's horror and amazement she saw the sick man's head rise up and his arm come about the horse's neck, and

there he was, dressed only in his long loose shirt of homespun wool, crawling, though he groaned for weakness, on to the horse's back.

She never waited to see more: she flew from the gallery down the little stairs, calling:

"Nurse, nurse! Michael! Tamburlaine's going off with him again; he's taken Estercel! Call Owen, call Michael!" she cried like a mad thing, as she thought of another ride; but when she got round the house there was the horse going sedately in the sun, and Estercel upright on his back, gazing about him with his hollowed eyes, half-strange like an owl in the daylight. Gentle as a sheep the horse walked around while all the world ran up the hill to look at the miracle. Many an eye dropped a tear to see the emaciation of the youth, the long thin legs that hung down, the cropped head, the hollow cheeks. But there was a something in the half-smile on his face, in the high look of him, that rejoiced them all.

"It's a resurrection!" said Nurse Phaire. "He'll have done with me now. I've lost my pet."

Estercel leaned down on the horse's neck and spoke in his ear; softly the creature paced along till he came to their favourite hollow on the hillside where they used to lie together. Then he went down on his knees and twenty hands at once helped Estercel from his dangerous perch. He refused to go indoors, so twenty more fetched his mantle and thick woollen coverings and made him a soft and pleasant couch in the sun. There he laid down his head and slept, exhausted; slept for hour after hour while the faithful Tamburlaine lay still on the grass beside him, his neck stretched out, his heavy head lying on the grass by his master's hand.

Often and often he was tempted to roll and throw up his feet in the air, but he restrained himself and kept quiet.

On the other side of the sleeping man sat Sabia, her needlework between her hands, but her mind very little occupied with it. She was busy making pictures out of the future and the past; she looked at the sleeping man beside her with a new kind of awe; this was not the old Estercel nor ever would be again; she saw it when he smiled; she had seen it when he was on the horse's back and his head and face were held up against the sky.

Meantime Father Machen had arrived from Dunganon; he had come riding in, one man only with him, and he had had a great welcome. While Estercel rested and slept below, the priest had a fine lunch in the hall; all ran to wait on him and to tell the news. He was a broad, sensible, red-faced man with a great appetite for conversation and a sound sense that enabled others to profit by it. He made Owen sit to the table while he ate; Nurse Phaire stood at his left hand and served him and poured out all the news which Owen left her, which was not much.

Thus it came to pass that when Estercel awoke he found the priest sitting beside him, knowing all his story and a good deal more besides. Strange and bewildered he was at first, but when the old nurse had brought him a basin of strong broth and propped him up, head and shoulders, he made shift to talk a little.

"Where's my horse?" he said, looking about him.

"I sent him off with himself," answered the father. "He's nothing but a heathen, though he's a white one. Would you have him listen to the counsels of your priest?"

The young man smiled, but continued to look about him uneasily. "Well, but where is he?" he said again.

"Having a feed of oats down below with Michael. He went off quite content directly the oats were mentioned to him."

Estercel seemed satisfied and laid down his head.

"Well," said the father cheerily, "isn't the weather beautiful, and isn't it a fine thing to have you out of doors like this, on the road to your health?"

"That's gone," said Estercel. "I'll never be the same man again. Look at my hands; they nearly wrenched them off me." He held them up and showed the twisted swollen joints.

The priest examined them. "They'll soon be better," he said. "That's a small thing. Be thankful they didn't take them off entirely; and they left you the nose on your face and your two ears. Faith, I think you've good reason to be thankful."

But Estercel did not even smile, his heart was too bitter. "There's no thankfulness in me," he said; "I'm turned a heathen, father; the same as my horse."

"Tchs, tchs, tchs," said the priest; and he thought privately in himself was this the doing of the young woman with the red hair?

"God and the saints and the Mother," went on the young man—"they *may* be of some use when they are in heaven, but they're none that I can see here below. I made a fool of myself once praying and crying on them to help me and I'll never do it again."

"But you were delivered," said the priest. "Suppose you were to tell me how?" he said, thinking he saw a chance for a good argument.

"I believe it was through the repentance of the person that trapped me into the prison," he answered.

"Well, and what about that repentance?" he answered. "The changing of the heart, what is it but the work of God?"

Estercel considered for a moment. "You won't get round it that way," he said. "There was many a poor fellow left in that prison that'll die there for all his praying, die between four stone walls."

Even as Estercel spoke, something of the horror that had weighed on him rose and passed. At the same time the rosy comfortable look left the priest's face; strong stern lines that had been graven there seemed to start out, revealing another man.

It was that man that spoke now, spoke not from doctrine but from the depths of his soul. "That's true," he said, "I don't deny it. I prayed fast enough when they lashed my back to ribbons and hung me and left me for dead and I never had an answer to those prayers yet. But for all that I don't deny the goodness of the Almighty. He strengthens the soul; that's what He does; ay, feeds it with His sweet bread and wine. He's the sunlight and all to me. Anyway, I've given Him my soul to keep."

Estercel stretched out his hand and the priest took it gently and held it between both his. The bitterness that had held him both waking and in his dreams began to melt away.

"Tell me one thing," said the priest; "what about that woman (they say she is a great beauty) that entrapped you, according to Owen? Are you letting your mind dwell upon her?"

"Why would I do that?" said Estercel. "I have

no quarrel with her now. She did me a bad turn, but she repented of it and came herself to get me out of the prison."

"Well, indeed," said the priest; "I thought it was Owen got you out. So they're saying at all events."

Estercel laughed. More than once when they had thought him asleep he had heard Owen expatiating.

"They're saying," went on the priest cautiously, "that the young woman we're talking of has been seen about Ardhoroe."

Estercel smiled. "They'll say anything," he said. "Any foolery is enough to content them. They must talk about something."

"That's so," said the priest. "Well, and I've something in my pocket for you now, something that will make you the proudest man in Ireland to-day."

Out of his leather satchel he took a large square letter tied with a silken cord and sealed with a great seal bearing the arms of Tyrone.

Estercel's face lit up with joy. "Tyrone's seal!" he cried. "Oh, is it Himself that has written to me?"

There were but two or three lines inside thanking the youth for the good performance of his commission, his staunchness in keeping silence, and Tyrone's hope that he would soon be restored to strength and ready to serve his country in the time of danger that was drawing near. Only a few lines, but they were written with all the energy which sent every word of Tyrone's, written or spoken, straight to the mark. Gold, nor jewels, nor anything in the world could have been as welcome to Estercel. He had never thought of himself as deserving thanks. Rather he had been eating his heart out with rage at having been made a fool of by a young

woman and that under the eyes of all men. The blood in his veins seemed to sweeten as he read and re-read the letter.

That night he refused to return to his bed in the hall: the walls of that recess were painted over and over with the memory of his torment, the very air of it seemed to hold the dissolving pictures that he dreaded. So they found him a clean shed below in the haggard and made him a couch on the fresh straw: by the door Tamburlaine lay down and his dogs beyond, and six men to watch, sleeping turn and turn about. The women had lost their care.

As for Estercel, the night was an ecstasy: one day had given him back freedom and the open sky and his life before him to live: his horse and the praise of a great leader; ay, and more than that; for the confession of his pain and the words of the priest had somehow drawn the thorn and the bitterness from his heart; had given him back the friendship of that Someone whose whisper runs along from star to star, who speaks profound things to the soul.

In the dim twilight of the June night he would lift up his letter; there was just light enough to see the large seal black on the parchment; from there he looked out to the stars across the shapes of men and the huge quarters of Tamburlaine who lay by the door. He heard a whisper of Owen's.

"Ay, she'll miss him to-night. She'll surely seek him towards morning, the red devil. It's a good thing we have him down here among us again."

CHAPTER XXIX

HOW TAMBURLAINE WAS PUNISHED

YES, the women had lost their care; the men had got Estercel among them again. The rapidity of his recovery was something extraordinary. He made new blood every day. His flesh healed and became sound. Muscles and sinews regained their power. The cropped hair and the beard began to grow, a chestnut brown. The grey pallor of his face gave way to the colour of the health that is got from wind and sun.

It was a resurrection indeed; he had been but a fortnight on his feet when men began to speak of him as of a leader. There was a depth of the eye, a government of the lip, that told of thought at work within. His words were not many, they were few and simple, but they were always clear and always had a meaning.

The men respected him for the strong fight that he made with his weakness. At daybreak that very first morning he was on to his horse's back and away. They followed him and brought him back and fed and rested him; but soon he was off again in spite of them. His horse was his favourite companion; with him he found what he needed, affection and silence. Under the open sky with the free wind on his face he needed to think over all that he had seen and felt and suffered. As soon as he could sit his horse easily, without giddiness or fear of falling, he went up on to Slieve Gallion; from the rock's side he could look out over the tumbled beauty of

the land; forest-filled glens, streams narrow and broad, rounded green woods, fair pastures with a thousand flowers, lovely in themselves, a spread banquet for the herds. Most of all his eye sought out the dwellings of men, while he thought of their wars and their fierceness, their cruelties and their sufferings, their goodness and their tender hearts. He pondered too on the difficult laws of God which govern all, so entangled in their operation, so hard to trace out, so little understood. For the first time he questioned and considered his own joy in battle. Having suffered, he began to know what he inflicted. "I must fight and I will fight," he said to himself. "But I will endeavour not to make a pleasure of it."

One day as he lay on a mountain slope he saw a hawk who had long been quivering high up in the blue air suddenly pounce on a yellow-hammer that was playing by the rocks below. The wee screams of the little creature came up to him where he sat; a while ago he would neither have heard nor heeded; now it seemed too much for him to bear. Then he watched the lips and tongue and powerful teeth of his horse, how they tore and relished and devoured the tender grasses and the tiny flowers of the mountain slope on which he lay.

"They are alive too and enjoying the sun," he said to himself. "Why should they be tortured and torn? Well, it is the Almighty's regulation that creatures should live by tearing and feasting on each other. I have nothing to do with it." A shudder crept along his flesh. He was weak still and the tears rose in his eyes as he thought out his accusation against the Supreme who could base a world on such a plan. Then the priest's words came back to him: "He strengthens the soul."

"That's true too," he thought. "I know it in my heart." The puzzle of the world was too great for him. His wits failed him. His head sank down on his breast; he folded his hands and resigned himself; and with that resignation came the flowing in of a still peace, like the tides of the air or the sea and he troubled no more.

Slowly and reluctantly on these days he would turn to go home for his mid-day meal. He was disgusted with stone walls; he feared the women; he had had too much of them. He was sulky even with Sabia; why, he did not know. Simply he could not help it. He would just eat and then be off out of doors fearing lest they should catch him and master him again.

In a fortnight's time he was hard at work again, at the marching and the drilling and the manœuvring of his men. Every day they shot at a target and practised running and leaping; in the regiments of the north swiftness and activity were quite as much regarded as strength. Every day messengers came running from the south, the east, and the west, bringing war news, telling how the cannon and the engines of Essex were battering the castles of the south. With thrill upon thrill, the very air seemed to vibrate and the winds to carry fear and hope from heart to heart. Great pride the women took in their men: they freely assembled at the sound of the war-pipes and clapped their hands as the lads came by. Here was no hired army, fighting for a wage, compelled by destiny; here was no miserable crowd of camp-followers, at once destroyers and destroyed; here were ranks of free-men at the very top of their spirit, with free-women, their mates and their coadjutors, standing to egg them on.

Therefore, at that time one Irish soldier was a match for any two English, and the leaders on both sides knew as much and said so and have left their opinions on record for all to read.

Wherever the marching and the discipline of the men took place Estercel and his horse were to be seen; Sabia seldom or never. For some reason her whole self seemed to have suffered a change. From the moment that she had seen the grey face and cropped head of Estercel raised up against the sky, she felt no longer the same; it was as if some spring in her nature long sealed under the surface had suddenly burst forth. She had looked on a new thing with new eyes. The creature that she had seen there with the high and suffering face did not and could not belong to her. The powers and deities might take him and mend him, for the task was not hers.

She no longer desired anything very ardently for herself. Only she wished to get the charm from Estercel's finger; for she was now ashamed of it. Her feeling was something like that of a boy who has hunted a bird, and catching it at last and carrying it in his hand begins to weary of its ruffled feathers and dim eye and so does not grieve to see it escape to the world of blue air to which it belongs.

A sense of peace came to Sabia with her renunciation of desire. Foolish girlhood seemed to fall away from her and the woman within had a chance to be. A new dignity and gentleness sat upon her very well. In her simple way it was as if she confided Estercel and herself both to the operation of the great laws that twist the stars about the sun and knead up the souls of men. Her own work she had by this time begun to

know and she did it with steadiness and goodwill. Young as she was, she was growing to be the mother of her people. One small thing led to another. The sick came to her and she wished then to see if the counsels given had been followed. The moment that the sudden escape of Estercel had set her free, she began to visit the people in their homes. Everywhere she was received as hereditary chieftainess; open faces, looks of affection, and a personal reverence accompanied her wherever she went. By a smile and a touch of the hand she could do more than another with armfuls of gifts.

Sabia was not without wisdom and a certain swift decision of character. When she saw what she imagined was the right thing to be done she was quick to do it. She went to see the bald child and its foolish mother for example; and gave some attention to the old mother-in-law who crouched in the corner by the fire, a shapeless heap under a blue cloak with a wicked black eye beaming in her head. Having translated to her own satisfaction the bitter glance of the old woman, that very evening she had her removed to the dwelling of another relation to whom an allowance of corn made her a welcome guest. Who blessed Sabia now more heartily than the harmless little family whom she had delivered from a tyrant?

About four o'clock in the afternoon of a bright day in July she was slowly riding homewards on the brown mare Eliza, her dog beside her for a guard. She had been to see the little yellow man and his daughter Bride, for whom she felt both pity and affection. The little man had been overjoyed at her coming and she had done all that she could to soothe and sweeten his mind.

She was very contented as she rode; a sort of dim light from within seemed to be welling up and overspreading all her mind. For the first time a conception of the sacred life dawned upon her; a life in which the swiftly moving crowd of moments should one and all be illuminate.

A picture she had seen but a few nights before recurred to her. She had been returning home in the evening by a path which wound westward through some low-lying wet lands. In face of her was a red and golden sunset whose brightness penetrated all the air and the round sky. Between her and the sunset a man was walking away westward; he was barefoot, stepping slowly across a plashy piece of brown bogland, half marsh, half bog. His figure was black against the red heart of the sunset; as he walked on slowly, drawing out each bare foot from the mire in turn, behind him the hollow of the print filled up with water that made a mirror for the sunset light. Before the man lay the black bog: where he had trodden his footprints had turned to red gold. Meditating upon this, Sabia talked to herself. "I know it. I feel it now," she said. "This is the want of the soul; this is the power that has chosen out our holy men and women of Ireland these hundreds and hundreds of years. The black miry road underfoot, the door of heaven before, and the golden track behind."

This way she was thinking with her mind filled with a sort of sad joy when suddenly she heard a piercing whistle from the hillside above. She looked and there was Estercel coming down towards her. He wore a leather jacket and a steel cap on his head and he carried an arquebuse slung on his back.

He came straight towards her. "Good evening to you, Sabia," he said. "I am glad to meet with you; it is not very often now that we can meet and have a quiet word together."

"We are both of us busy in our own way," answered she.

"That is so," he said. "Indeed, I am hearing your praises very often: they say there is not your like in the country for wisdom; that you have gifts beyond your years."

"You know yourself that once the good word or the evil word is started there is no stopping it; there it is in every one's mouth, and often neither sense nor reason behind it."

"That is so," said Estercel. "But it seems to me there is sense and reason both in your case. What have you in the basket?"

"Nothing now," said she. "I did but carry some beef water and cakes of wheaten bread to that poor child, but I doubt he is past caring. But tell me, Estercel, what were you wanting out of my basket?"

"I want a good strip of strong linen to bind about my wrist to strengthen it," said he.

"Here is a clean cloth which I had folded about the cakes. Do you give me the knife from your belt and I will soon cut a strip for you. Only I will first get off my horse."

Down she slipped lightly, basket in hand. Taking the knife from Estercel she sat down on a big stone and shore a strip from the cloth while Estercel held her mare by the rein. "Have you been feeling it very weak to-day?" she asked.

"Not specially so to-day; indeed, it is stronger all

the time. To-day I wish to strengthen it, because I have a mind to correct Tamburlaine. Will you wind the linen about it close and tight for me, if you will be so kind, Sabia?" He held out the hand and arm, scarred now but still shapely, the flesh on it firm and more full and round each day. As Sabia wound the strip close and tight the red colour mounted to her face, for she thought of the day by the salmon river, so long, so very long ago.

"I am surprised," she said, "that you should think of correcting Tamburlaine, so good as he is and so devoted to you. Every one is making a hero of him because of the ride."

"That is just what is the matter with him," said Estercel. "He is altogether above himself. He is spoilt. He has been too long out of discipline. Instead of showing obedience and following behind me, whenever he chooses he just walks away. Twice I have warned him; now this is the third time. I did but lie down on the hill and close my eyes for a few minutes, and when I opened them he was gone off on his own occasions."

"But I hope you will not hurt him, Estercel. He may have thought that you were sleeping sound and would not soon awake, and then the time may have gone by with him faster than he knew."

"It is no use your begging for him, cousin. A great horse like that, a horse of battle, must submit to discipline, must give obedience to his master, always and at once. It is too dangerous to have him raking the country with his head in the air, a law to himself. You should see him with Owen, the contempt of him and the bold looks! and all because Owen dared to smack his face!"

"I have seen it," said Sabia, and she sighed. She had finished binding up his wrist and Estercel stood looking at the bandage and weighing his heavy fist in his left hand.

"I will bring down his pride," said Estercel. "He will become a terror else. He knows too well how to use his teeth and his hoofs. You have never seen him in battle, so you do not know what he can do. And now I suppose I will have to walk home without him."

As he spoke, the mare uttered a loud neigh and like an echo it was answered from far away. Presently the trampling of hoofs was heard, and down the hill galloped the white horse, snorting, throwing out his heels, laughing as he came. But when he saw his master standing there, looking so stern, his conscience awoke in him, he knew he was to blame: he had deserted him while he slept in order to have a game of play by himself. Therefore he began slowly backing off, shaking his head this side and that, very full of his nonsense and not overmuch abashed. But Estercel called to him sternly. "Here!" he said, "here, and make no delay. Sabia, take the mare by the bridle and lead her a little distance off and turn your back if you do not want to see him punished."

The young woman obeyed, but for the life of her she could not help turning round in time to see the beast come slowly up to his master with a shy look that sought for forgiveness and affection. Right opposite him he stopped. Then Estercel spoke.

"*You*," he said, "you have disobeyed me again. You must take your punishment. If there is any fault it is yours for you had your warning." As he spoke, he lifted up his fist and let drive a smashing blow at

the horse's forehead. His knuckles split on the bone, and the horse staggered and all but came down; his legs spread and he dropped his head almost to the ground, and stood so, stunned and stupid.

The mare plunged and snorted and the tears ran down Sabia's cheeks as she held to the bridle. Estercel looked now at his horse, now at his knuckles.

"You hit him too hard," said Sabia.

"I did," said Estercel. "And I have hurt my hand."

"I do not care for that," said Sabia, still crying.

"He would never have hurt you."

"That is true. But he will recover. Ride you home, now. No, do not go to him. I will not have him pitied: he must learn. We will come presently. Good-night."

"Good-night," said she, and she went away leading the mare, her head hanging.

Presently she looked back; the horse was standing in the same position. Estercel was standing looking after her; in a minute more she looked back again. Estercel had sat down with his back to Tamburlaine; he was leaning his head on his hand and looking at the ground.

Late that evening the two came home. Estercel walked first, his thumbs in his belt, the horse after him, head down, following him like a dog.

CHAPTER XXX

ESTERCEL DISCOURSES OF HIMSELF

Now August comes on, that fair and bright month which should see everywhere the green gilt of the ripening corn. But the whole south is blackened and destroyed with a double destruction. Where Essex has met with resistance he has slaughtered and burned; where he has met with friendship, the swift running regiments of the north have descended and in revenge have performed the same office: so that everywhere is famine and bitter misery of children and women.

The north is more formidable than ever: in Dungannon sits Tyrone, that great tall brown man, "the handsomest man of his time." In the strong press at Dungannon is the crown of phoenix feathers sent by the pope; and while he despatches his armies, he dreams of another crown built of a more solid material. Why not? The ruling sovereigns of Europe now address him as Brother.

In the heather by the Pass of the Curlews waits Red Hugh O'Donnell, he of the word of lightning and the iron will. About him stand and kneel his men, without sleep and food, praying and fasting the whole night long, waiting for the English captains and the troopers. Before nightfall the noble Sir Conyers Clifford, his captains, and his men lie dead and stripped, looking for all the world like white sheep in flocks upon the hills: Red Hugh, widows' made and blind prayers granted, draws off to the north.

In his lodging in Dublin Castle sits Essex, worn and ill; a most miserable man.

His campaign in the south is over; he has got no credit by it. Up in the north the rebels laugh at him. There is the deep grass and the ripening corn and three hundred thousand steers; the council can no longer plead that there is no food for horse or man; but still they mysteriously dissuade him from setting out.

There he sits and with that hand of "incomparable fineness" writes his sad rhyme of:

" True Patience, the provender of fools,
Sad Patience that waiteth at the door."

Presently his first gentleman puts on his robes (but a few are left now of the throng that hung upon him so lately as the month of May) and he goes down to the council chamber to hear the clerk read the vituperations of Elizabeth, directed against the council and himself together.

" It appeareth," she writes in this month of August, " that all the council have united themselves to dissuade the northern journey after they had joined with you seven days before in a request for greater numbers. Is it not enough for you of the council to have been the greatest causes of corruption, but that you must, at the landing of our lieutenant, seek to divert his course? Apply your counsels to that which may shorten and not prolong the war. . . . What can be the reason of your stay? "

How curiously must the words of the queen have fallen on the ears of Essex and of these men who had each the secret advices of Cecil conveyed to him and who knew well how all reality of power was leaving the queen as her minister grew more and more powerful.

Imagine her now, that gorgeous old woman, with her splendid accomplishments, her genius, and her rhetoric; there she sits enthroned at her council board in her red wig and white satin embroidered in black; she is hung all over with diamonds and rubies and emeralds as big as pigeon's eggs, a blazing mass of splendour: on the table are piles of parchments; before her are Essex's letters; round about, on their stools, sit Cecil and the officers of the Privy Council. All of them pretty gorgeous in their silks, satins, and jewels. That little crooked man, five foot two in height with the curved spine, Elizabeth's "little elf" and James's "pigmy," is Robert Cecil, grandson of Seisyllt, Henry VII.'s yeoman of the guard. There he sits, he that never had a friend, he that was captain of an army of paid spies, torturers, poisoners, and bullies, he that cared nothing for learning, literature, or art: perhaps the hardest worker of his time and unquestionably the most powerful man in the whole world at that moment, though the fact was only known to himself and one or two others. Was not Elizabeth the greatest of sovereigns and was not his foot planted on her neck? Ay, and not only that but was not the goggle-eyed James, Elizabeth's foolish successor, already looking out of his pocket?

The friends of Essex were in a minority at that council board for "the Cecilians kept down his party knowing he should thus be subject to take cold at his back." Their faces are cast down, Elizabeth frowns, the small eye and the wide forehead of Cecil are quiet and without expression as the clerk reads aloud from the letters of Essex. "I lie open to the malice and practice of mine enemies in England who first procured a cloud of disgrace to overshadow me, and now in the

dark give me wound upon wound." As the bull roars in the ears of the man that goads him, so does Essex complain in the hearing of his enemy and the sound is music to him.

Much sweeter than the scent of perfumed silk, sweeter than ambergris and clove-balls, was the smell of the sun-dried grasses and the little herbs of August on the hill-side at Ardhoroe. On the lower slopes of the castle of Ardhoroe lay Estercel, taking his rest. He had put off his steel jacket and leggings of leather and had swam up the river and down again; he now wore a loose suit of white homespun wool, the tunic belted above the hip. His eyes were closed and he was dozing in the sun. Below at the wood's edge, in the shade, lay Tamburlaine, resting also; he was more weary than his master; had not the one carried the other all the way to the Curlew mountains and back? The horse lay in a strange attitude, his forelegs hooped out in front of him, he head laid sideways upon his knee. So still was he that he looked like a horse of marble that had never drawn breath.

Presently, down the hill came Sabia, carrying a bronze cup of mead and a cake of oaten bread. She sat down beside Estercel. "Wake up," said she, "and take what I have brought you."

Estercel opened his eyes and sat up with great alacrity. "This is very welcome, Sabia," he said. "I have a terrible hunger and thirst upon me. Red Hugh takes no account of eating and drinking. If food is to be got, well and good; if not, all the better. He is a great believer in fighting and travelling on an empty belly. He says he gets twice the work out of hungry men, provided they are of good bone. And when there is

work to be done there is no need for sleep, he says. You sleep all the sounder and sweeter when the work is over." Estercel took a draught of the mead with great rejoicing and began to break up his cake. "Look here at my hand and my wrist," he said, "how thin they are grown: my ring slips up and down." He held out a great bony hand, scarred and strong, and with the fingers of the other hand he twisted the ring.

Sabia looked at it with a strange expression. "It is indeed loose upon you," she said. "You will be dropping it."

"Look at the eye of Tamburlaine," he said. "I can see from here it is half open. He is watching you. He is jealous, or else he is wishing a piece of oaten cake."

"I have not forgotten him," said the girl. "I have something for him also." She held up a round cake and whistled to the horse. He half raised his head and then dropped it again.

"He is very tired," said Estercel.

"I will go down to him," said she, and she ran lightly down the hill and across to the woodside. The horse lifted his head at her coming and looked at her placidly out of his large eyes. She knelt down beside him and stroked the warm shining neck and smoothed the forelock neatly on his forehead. "It is great folly of you to be jealous of me," she murmured. "You are by far the best loved of us two." Then she delicately balanced the oaten cake on his bent knee, and while he sniffed round about it she went up the hill again and sat down by Estercel, who waited her coming. "Tell me," said she, "has he been good all the time? have you ever punished him again? and has he made it up with Owen?"

"I have never needed to punish him," said Estercel. "I have exercised him well. He is at the very top point of discipline. Shall I whistle him up and show you?"

"No," said Sabia; "let him alone; he is happy. See him licking up the crumbs of his cake."

"As for Owen, I doubt if he will ever forgive him. He is cold and disobedient with him. He is a person that never forgets. If he ever do meet again those men that ill-treated him, he will make them pay for it. He was a terror in the battle. He ran about with open jaws; with his bare chest he overthrew more than one horse and rider together. Sabia, once I made a vow that I would never let myself enjoy fighting more: I fear it is no use; battle must ever remain a pleasure to me: when my rage comes upon me, I can do nothing but kill and, God forgive me, I do take a delight in it."

"That is very sad, Estercel," said Sabia. "It is indeed your duty to destroy your enemies, but I cannot understand your taking a pleasure in it." After a pause she spoke again: "And I take *my* pleasure in mending up the wounded and the sick. I believe that is what I was born for. If I can save a life or mend it, my heart sings like a bird."

"I understand that too," said Estercel. "Suppose our enemies were driven backward out of the land I would work night and day to heal this country of her wounds. But much I fear," he said, sighing deeply, "after a while I should wish to be doing a bit of fighting again, no matter with whom."

"That is the way men are made," said Sabia. "It is a pity they are no better. But I shall never forget to be grateful to the O'Neil, who started me on my

road. Estercel, which would you rather march with, O'Neil or Red Hugh? "

"Oh, there is no comparison," he answered. "Red Hugh is too red for me. His hair is red and his heart is red; ay, and his eyes are red. They shoot out red fire. I am too slow for him and too stiff-willed. The O'Neil tells me his wishes and I would die before I would give up the doing of them. Red Hugh bids me go like the blast of a trumpet, and something in me stands stock still. Is it not a strange thing? I believe that I am made on the same plan as the mule. It pleases me to sulk and go backwards where there is a compulsion upon me to go forwards."

"It is a most strange thing," said Sabia; together they sat there and ruminated on this curious point in the character of Estercel.

It was he himself who first tired of the subject.

"I will tell you another difference," said he, "between the O'Neil and Red Hugh. When I was in Dublin I saw wonderful great streams of English gentlemen; the place was like a flower-garden with them. I spoke with them and not a few of them: and I tell you this, the ways of the O'Neil are their ways: he is one of them, but that he is a finer man than all or most of them. Red Hugh is more like one of us. When we have a king of our own, it will be well to have one who is the equal in knowledge with other kings and of the same mode of behaviour."

"And shall we have a king of our own one day?" said Sabia, "and shall we be free? "

"Certainly we shall, and that soon," said Estercel, in a comfortable voice. But presently a change came over him and he lay back on the fragrant hill. "Oh,

but sometimes, Sabia, I have strange dreams, such miserable dreams. I see ranks and ranks of men in bright coloured clothes pouring out of the sunrise; always out of the sunrise they come. I hear the treading of thousands of feet on stone ways. I feel the ground shaking under their cannon; and then a dreadful fear comes upon me, a fear that all we do is in vain: that, like Coo'hoolun, we are only fighting the waves of the sea."

As he lay back in the sunlight, a cold sweat broke out over his forehead.

After that the silence between them was long and deep; the face of destiny is a terror to the young.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE RING AND THE FISHERMAN

ESTERCEL was indeed dog-tired. For two days he slept off and on; slept on the hill, in the hall, and on the river bank. He was so sleepy that while the food was leaving the plate on its way to his mouth he would be off dreaming!

Early on the morning of the second day, after a good breakfast of oatmeal porridge and skewered beef, he arranged himself on the oaken settle by the hall fire and soon was fast asleep. Sabia's father, who was now at home and of higher spirits and brighter countenance than he had been for some time past, looked at him with a smile, whistled to the dogs, and took his way out of doors.

A while afterwards, Sabia, coming down from an upper chamber, found the hall empty and deserted; she too was passing out without observing the man on the settle when a slight sound, something of the nature of a snore, caused her to turn round.

There lay Estercel, a happy man, a smile on his face and himself floating away in some delicious dream of riding or fighting or swimming or what not. His right arm was under his head, his left lay carelessly along.

Fascinated, she crept nearer and nearer to him: she looked troubled: her eyes had dark rings below them, as though she had not slept. She gazed upon him; the

smiling mouth was a little open; she saw the strong jaws and teeth, the young golden beard, the even peaceful breath.

"Ah me!" she thought, "well for the men that they can be so lazy. What would be thought of me if I were to do the like? Yet indeed his labour has been severe and it may be that his strength is not yet quite recovered since the fever. How great he is in his sleep! Indeed, my thought was a true one; here is no creature to be dragged in a halter like a pig or a donkey: he should act of his own free will."

Fearfully and delicately stretching out her arms with an even motion, her two hands lit like butterflies on the left hand of Estercel. Certainly he had put on flesh since the day before; the ring stuck in its place; her heart leaped as she pulled; she looked in his face; no change passed over it, he still smiled on; gently she worked the ring round about and off it came at last: still Estercel smiled on. With a backward glance over her shoulder the young woman skimmed across the hall and out at the door; but there was a dark look of trouble on her face as she went away with her prize through the heavy sultry air of a clouded August morning.

There is no law in the church to prevent a good priest from catching his own dinner of fish if he choose. It is a delightful occupation for those who do not vex themselves at the sad fate of worm or fish, as, for instance, Sabia was apt to do.

Father Machen was no tender-hearted girl; he knew that all things were given to him richly to enjoy: and rich was his enjoyment as he stood by the side of the silver river and watched the fish jump as though in delight at the cloudy morning. He was after the trout;

he had some fine ones in his basket already, but there was a big fellow, the king of them all, nose down under a stone in a pool below that he sorely wanted to get: while he was considering whether he should tuck up his cassock and go into the water after him, a faint muttering overhead caused him to look up skyward. From the south an ugly yellowish whirligig of a cloud was coming up fast, although no wind was stirring: it seemed to be just working along on a wind of its own making. Father Machen glanced up and down the river at the first muttering of the thunder, the fish ceased their jumping; a little witch-wind from nowhere sprang up and ruffled the river's face.

Father Machen cast one look upwards at the ugly sky, another into the water just at the spot where the big trout's tail, inclined upwards, wagged lazily with the motion of the stream: with a sigh he rolled up his rod and glanced up and down the river bank, trying to make up his mind whether to take shelter from the storm in a copse by the water-side or go up to the castle.

He decided to make for the copse, and slinging his basket on his back he followed the river path along. As he neared the trees he was surprised to see a small shining object turn and twist through the air and fall with a tiny splash in the river. A moment after a flash of red light ran thrilling by and a clap of thunder broke over his head; the father caught up his cassock and ran till he got among the bushes, then he looked about him for a safe harbour from the rain.

Before him at a little distance was the round spreading roof of an old thorn not so high as to be a mark for the lightning and solid enough for shelter. The rain had

already begun to splash and sing upon the leaves ; and the father bolted, head down, underneath the thorn-tree shelter, disturbing as he did so a small brown girl who sat upon the ground. It was Sabia ; and she rose up in astonishment to greet the father, who saw at once that her eyes were red and the tears were running upon her cheeks.

“ Good-morning to you, daughter,” said the father kindly, and she bowed before him while he extended his hand to her in blessing. “ Bound for Ardhoroe I am,” he said, “ and bringing my meat with me as usual,” and he showed her his basket. A fresh flash of lightning lit up the dark circle of shade beneath the tree roof and they both started as the thunder rattled overhead.

“ Dirty weather,” said the father cheerfully. “ We had better make ourselves comfortable while we may. Sit down, sit down, and I’ll do the same ; the old bush is thick enough overhead. There are two or three questions I’d like to ask you ; first and foremost, what was that you’re after throwing in the water ? ”

“ Only an old ring, father,” said Sabia, blushing.

“ And what was that old ring made of ? ” inquired the priest sharply.

“ It was gold, father,” said the girl.

“ And is the land so rich, and the people so rich, and the church itself so rich that you can afford to throw a gold ring to the fishes ? ”

The flush on Sabia’s face grew deeper. “ I don’t know,” she stammered, after a long pause, “ but what there was a sin in the ring. I thought it was best to make away with it.”

“ A sin ? ” said the priest with a suspicious sharpness. “ What sin ? ”

"Out of a little bird's nest it came," said the girl with a burst of tears.

"That's nonsense," said the priest, and both of them were so excited now that neither minded the storm. "Sheer folly and nonsense. Talk sense now or it's the heavy penance I'll put on you, Sabia O'Neil."

She pulled herself together. "Well, this is all of it," she said. "There was a body I liked which didn't like me, so I put a ring in a bird's nest for six weeks of the spring and then put it on that person's finger."

"Well, that's a queer notion," said the priest. "And what made you see the sin of it at last?"

"I found it was no manner of use, father," said Sabia, sadly.

"Dear me, dear me," said the father, considering whether he should pass so flimsy a conviction of sin. "Listen to me now: these sort of heathen enchantments are dangerous to meddle with. God knows what door you may be opening and to what things. Sure you know yourself when you lie upon your bed at night with your eyes shut what dangers there are around you, ay, and above and below. The power of the cross is our only safety. Look at that light now: and listen to that awful noise. Can you tell me what's the meaning of that? I'd never be surprised at anything happening myself. But that we have the protection of the church and God's providence anything might come up out of the water or down with the thunderbolt; and then where would we be?"

A cold trickling from the tree roof struck the back of Sabia's neck and made her look anxiously about; the river glimmered just as usual through the double veils of leaf and rainfall, and the thunder was moving away to

the north. At her feet a great black snail with a barred brown shell crawled across and lifted suddenly half his length to stare into her face. At sight of that black eyeless countenance, those waving horns, a shudder passed over Sabia and she buried her face in her hands; she hoped she would not see that snail again grown as big as any horse in her dreams.

"Well, well, daughter," said the priest more gently, seeing that she was impressed. "You need not trouble yourself over much. The spell after all was not malignant or dangerous. The ring itself may be purified by devoting it to a holy use could we only recover it." He rose up and peered through the branches of the thorn. The rain was leaving off, so he stepped out followed by Sabia. The river had risen already, and the water was swirling and thick.

"Just there it was that it fell, wasn't it?" said the priest. "Ah, well, the water's too dirty now to see anything. I'll send a boy I know and can trust to look for it to-morrow. We'll put a stone to mark the place." He looked about for a stone, found one whiter than the rest, and rolled it up to the edge of the water for a mark. Taking some red clay from the bank he made a cross upon it to denote that here was property of the church.

CHAPTER XXXII

A SMALL QUARREL

ON reaching Ardhoroe, Sabia ran straight upstairs; as she passed the narrow window something bade her look out; below was a strip of hill and presently across it went Estercel stooping low over the ground as though he were seeking something; a moment after he was followed by Owen in the same attitude. Sabia would not have been a girl if she had not laughed; laughed in spite of her sorrow; but silently, for there was no need to attract attention to herself. Changing her mind about remaining in her chamber, she did but arrange her hair and dress and then slipping quietly downstairs into the hall she drew out her big wool wheel and sat down in a dark corner to spin. On the settle by the fire slumbered the priest; he had been up early that morning, had walked far, and fished a good dozen of fine fish.

The serving men and women went to and fro setting the tables for the mid-day meal with loaves of wheaten bread, wooden platters and one or two of silver, pitchers of home-brewed ale and mead.

By and by in came Estercel; discontent was on his face; he looked moodily about the hall never seeing Sabia in her corner or else taking her for one of the maidens. After him followed Owen. Respecting the priest's slumbers, Estercel remained near the door while he talked with Owen. They pitched their voices low, but Sabia's ears were sharp and she heard them very well.

"I'm fairly beat," said Estercel. "The ring was on my finger as I left the house. I saw it as plain as I see you. I did but walk down to the river and sit on the bridge, when the lightning fell all around me and the most fearful and ear-splitting and desperate clap of thunder well-nigh burst my ears, and that very moment the ring was gone!"

Owen shook his head gravely. "I do not like the look of it at all," he said. "I wish there may be no ill-luck coming this way. That was no natural storm; it came up so quick and was so quick in passing; a nasty, ugly, and unnatural look it had. I wish some one we know be not at the bottom of this. For take notice that storm came up out of the south. Come here, Dermot," said he, beckoning to a tall lad who came in with a pitcher. "I think there have been none of those appearances we know of while we were down south?"

The lad came over, his eyes starting out of his head. "Not one at all. We've been as comfortable as crows in a nest all the time you've been away, thanks be to God for that same. But you'll scarcely believe what I'm telling when I say that old Ronnat is now in the kitchen talking at a hard gallop of what she seen a while back: will I bring her up and you can hear for yourselves?"

While the lad was gone to fetch Ronnat, Estercel and Owen talked in low tones by the door. Sabia from her dark corner behind her humming wheel looked across at Father Machen; his eyes were apparently closed, his hands folded. But even as she looked, one eyelid lifted and disclosed half an eye so expressive of peace, good counsel, and holy innocence that Sabia was thankful to dive once more behind her wheel.

The old woman came hobbling in, her hair flying in grey wisps from under the hood of her scarlet cloak.

"Ah, dear, ah, dear! and so the ring is lost? Well, and it will be herself that has got it, sure enough: am I not after seeing her in the broad daylight? Up the hill she came, looking and peering for some one or something and I saw the lightning flying round her head and her hair as bright as the lightning itself. Like this she held out her arms—" and with a wild gesture the old woman flung out her hands—"and, oh, but she had the sad seeking face upon her."

"Did you know her again?" asked Estercel.

"Ay, well I know her," cried Ronnat. "Many's the time I've sat at her father's hearth and seen her they called Meraud dancing out on the floor, yes, and backing the wildest horse in stall. Ay, she was the grandest woman in Erin, as you, Estercel, are the grandest man. Much I fear I'll never set eyes on her again. Those that leave and go away in youth and strength and beauty do hardly ever come back. But wherever she is she's in need of help this minute, and though she were in a queen's palace my voices tell me she's wanting Him," and she pointed with her finger at Estercel.

Ronnat was well known to have the gift of second sight: so wild and so convinced were her words and her gestures that all who heard her felt the cold thrill of supernatural fear. Though Sabia and the priest knew right well where was the ring, they were both distressed: both were equally convinced that the spirit of the red-haired woman was out seeking Estercel, and if she had not found the ring, well, she might do so yet.

The priest sat up straight upon the settle; Sabia in her corner trembled with strange fears. What if this

woman were really coming for Estercel? What if he obeyed and followed the beckoning spirit till he came before her very face, and home and country knew him no more? Her wheel stopped and her head sank low.

Then the master of the house appeared in the door; there was a great stir and racket; men and maidens hurried in carrying steaming dishes of fish and meat, and soon thirty souls were seated round the great table, the dogs waited behind, and the heads of children bobbed about the door.

O'Neil sat with Sabia on one side of him and the priest on the other. He was cheerful, nearly gay; though he had little room in his head for anything save the ordering of the war, yet it pleased him that the people spoke daily more and more of the discretion and even of the wisdom of his daughter. He glanced sideways more than once at her during the meal and was pleased to remark, as he had never done before, the fine small lines of beauty, and the strength and directness of the brows and eyes when they faced him. The inevitable thought occurred to him, "A thousand pities she was not a boy," followed by the thought, "Ah, well, she makes no bad lieutenant here at home: better than a wild lad at anyrate." Being in fine spirits himself, he never remarked the oppression that hung over every one at the table: an oppression that drove Sabia out of doors the first moment she could decently escape, leaving dogs, children, and servants to dispute the remains of the meal.

She ran down to hide herself in the margin of the thick deep woods, and sitting on a fallen log gave herself to thought.

"Now," she said to herself, "I have thrown my all

away. My father loves me not; my nurse grows daily more feeble; I cannot abide these two dreadful aunts who are to come and rule over me, since she is grown so weak. In casting away the ring I am like a drowning creature that has loosed hold. I care not to live unloved in a world where men ride and fight and burn and starve and slay; there is no place for women; no time for learning or civility. I will go back to the dear sisters of my convent at Rouen. I cannot fight a spirit."

With a shiver she gazed around her: the air had cleared after the storm; shafts of sunlight pierced between the leaves and fell upon the ground about her in many pretty circles of light and shade and half-shade. Near her, four thrushes, full-grown and full-fledged, fat and lazy, hopped all together in a bunch, crying out in lamentable voices for their parents to come and feed them. And as she watched them idly, while thinking her sad thoughts, the little parents came, smaller than the children, thinned down with hard work, their mouths full of worms and caterpillars which they might not eat. A great noise they made all together, for after the meal, which was much disputed, the parents lessoned and taught the children how to seek for food and how to fly, and reasoned with them, but the young ones wished for nothing but to be back in the nest, fearing the dangerous world outside.

Sabia felt for the anxious squeaking children: it was hard to take flight; she knew it. If she fled back to her convent, half her soul, and more than half, would remain behind to wander in the woods and ride among the hills. Not a day or a night but her soul's shadow would be abroad to listen to the fall of the river and the lowing of the cows and to haunt about the remembered foot-

steps of Estercel. And good right she would have; the very ground here knew her for an O'Neil. But what right had this red-haired girl?—coming to a place she knew not, by a road she knew not, looking for a man who did not think of her! A dangerous woman, a witch of a woman she must be, that had such powers. She shuddered again as she glanced about her. Very red the sunlight looked as it struck on the trunk of a tall pine! How green was the young dress of that tiny beech that had forgotten to wake in the spring time! And hark, was that a rustling among last year's leaves?

In a fright, she turned her head; something was moving among the tree-trunks. She thought, "If it is the red-haired one, I shall die." She sat as close as a mouse, watching and waiting. Something lightish-coloured was moving along the borders of the wood. In another moment she guessed it was Estercel and in that moment her mind was made up that she would question him. Slowly he came along; sometimes he looked on the ground: then she laughed to herself and thought, "He is looking for the ring." Sometimes he stood upright and looked about him and then she sighed and thought, "He is looking for that other one."

Slowly he came, looking about him to left and right; Sabia sat so still that he would have passed her, taking her for a brown tree stem, but for the glimmering of her face.

Then he came readily forward and seated himself beside her without a word.

"Well, Sabia," he said at last, looking heavily on the ground; "your ring is gone."

It was hard for the girl to say anything to this, so she remained silent.

"I ought to have minded it better," he said presently.

She tried to speak to this, but only brought out a murmur which soon died away.

"I wonder who has it now," he said, still looking on the ground.

"God knows," said Sabia, thinking of the fishes. "But I wonder that you trouble yourself about it, a small thing like that."

"It is not so much the loss of the ring itself," said Estercel seriously, "as the thought that some person may have obtained power over me by finding it. There is a charm in the ring as you well know."

"I shall not pretend that I did not hear what old Ronnat said to you," said Sabia. "She talked so loud that the whole house heard her. I have gone in fear ever since lest I should meet the red-haired individual. Estercel, since she loves you so dear, would it not be well for you to rid the rest of us of an undesired presence by going after her yourself?"

Estercel was thunderstruck. "And is that the way *you* speak to me?" he said to her; "with the tongue and the look of the enemy, you that I thought were my friend?"

The girl hung her head and was silent. "I am going back to the convent of the White Sisters," she said at last. "There will be no witches there at least. But I would like to part friends with you, Estercel."

Estercel's astonishment was very great. He looked at her: there she sat, so meek and small, with a white face and no appearance of a nasty bitter temper upon her. But then how soft does the dove seem, and yet what an angry fighting bird! Estercel moved nearer to her; he placed his broad hand on her shoulder.

"What is the matter with you?" he said severely. "It appears to me that you are talking great foolishness. Is it any fault of mine if . . ." and here he paused.

"Take away your hand. I will not be touched," said she angrily. "And finish your sentence. 'Any fault of yours if . . .'? There must be strange matter in your heart of hearts, Estercel, for you to be followed by witches. Ay, tell me truly now," and she turned and faced him straight: "this woman with the red hair, that they say loved you, that had you thrown in prison and took you out again as the whole country knows, is not your heart with her and hers with you that she should come hither after you?"

Estercel was staggered a little. He drew himself away from Sabia to his own end of the log and fell to considering.

Presently he spoke. "I do not like your way of speaking to me, cousin," he said, "and what is the matter with you I do not know. But since you have asked me for an answer I will say there is no shadow of love in my heart for Lady Meraud FitzPierce, nor ever has been; and if she comes here it is not by will of mine."

Sabia sighed deeply and then she burst into tears.

Estercel forgot his resentment in a moment. "Oh, what is the matter now?" he said. "Indeed, it seems I cannot speak without offending you."

Very quickly she cheered up again; she brushed away her tears and moved nearer to Estercel. "If I tell you something, will you promise not to be angry with me?" she said.

"Oh, certainly, surely," he said in haste, delighted that she had ceased to cry and dreading lest she should recommence.

She moved a little nearer to him still and looked anxiously into his face, but there was no sternness left in it at all. "I will tell you where your ring is," she said. "It is at the bottom of the river. I took it from your finger when you slept and threw it in the water."

Sabia found it easy to read the thoughts of Estercel. He was surprised; and he was glad: he was vexed with her, and he was disappointed at one and the same time. After all, it had seemed a fine thing to have the spirit of the beautiful Meraud riding on a thunderstorm and disturbing the whole country because of him. Still, it was possible she might have done him a mischief: if she had once got as far as taking a ring off his finger, God knows what she might have done next. Dismissing her from his mind, he turned his thoughts on the creature that sat by his side and looked anxiously at him. He considered her for a little space.

"And why did you do such a thing, Sabia? The ring was yours, of course, to do what you would with, but I thought you gave it to me?"

Pale and with drooping neck Sabia answered him: "A year and a half ago it was when I first thought of it. I was very young then and had not much sense. Now I am quite altered, quite changed. I would never think of doing such a thing now. I would not tie up even a dog. Now I wish you to be free."

There was a long silence.

"I am very much obliged to you," he said. "You have a kind heart and that I well know. But I am sorry to lose the ring. Will you have the goodness to tell me in what part of the river did you throw it?"

"Come and I will show you," answered she.

CHAPTER XXXIII

DIPPING FOR THE RING

"It is right for me to tell you," said Sabia, as they neared the river bank, "that Father Machen did most unfortunately see me throw the ring into the water."

"Oh, indeed," said Estercel. "And what effect did it have upon him?"

"He desired very greatly to possess himself of the ring for the benefit of the church," said Sabia.

"Did he go into the water to seek it?" said Estercel.

"No, for the water was not clear; also the ring had fallen into a pool; in fact I threw it into deep water on purpose."

"It is all the safer from the father," answered he.

"Not so," said Sabia: "he spoke of employing some one to dive for it. Here is the spot: and here is the stone which the father laid as a mark."

Estercel stood still and reflected, and the more he reflected the more sulky he grew.

"The people are talking of how wise you are become, Sabia. It was not a very wise thing to steal the ring from me and throw it in the water and then to expect me to fish it out."

"You are making a mistake," answered the girl; "I did not expect you to fish it out, nor did I ask you to do so. I did not know the father was behind the bushes, nor did I know old Ronnat would see the red-haired one in the thunderstorm and delude you with her

visions. I have brought you here because I did not wish the father to have the ring; also I wished to prove to you that no other person than myself had taken it."

"Your tongue is very nimble," said Estercel, looking solemnly at her flushed cheek.

"It is my only weapon," answered she.

"You need employ no weapon against me," said he.

Sabia reflected. "I will not for the sake of peace and a smiling countenance give in to what is false. It was you, Estercel, who turned your nimble tongue against me, saying that I had asked you to fish up the ring after having thrown it in the water."

"Contention belongs to a woman," said Estercel.

"Well, then, we'll leave it so," said Sabia, bitterly. "I see it plainly, I have seen it all my life; truth and justice are nothing unless they belong to a man. The strong are always in the right of it. A man may have the head of a cuckoo, and the heart of a weazel, and a right hand that sows nought but anguish and destruction; and because he is a man he is in the right of it, though he stood before Saint Bridget herself."

Estercel looked down at the small passionate creature: what was the matter with her? She was very angry with him, he could see. His heart began to beat; how was it that brown eyes could scatter fire? She seemed to grow more near and more dear to him when she was in a passion. So used his pet goldfinch fall in a rage and ruffle its feathers and peck at his fingers and he only loved the bird the better.

Judging by the affectionate expression of his countenance, Sabia guessed that he was not giving any thought to what she said. Wringing her hands together, she turned away and her face grew pale as she looked down

at the lapping brim of the river at her feet. Then she felt a large hand on her shoulder.

"I did not mean to vex you," said a kind and gentle voice; "it is plain to be seen that the ring is indeed gone since anger can come between us. Do not look so sad. I had rather have you angry than sad! I will not vex you again if I can help it."

Sabia looked up in his face and sighed. "Well, then, do not, I ask you, when you talk with me say 'all women this' and 'all women that,' throwing us all together in one heap and casting shame upon the lot after the common fashion of men. Listen, Estercel; why should you take the sins of the light woman and the slut, of the gluttonous drunken woman and the fool, and, binding them together in one pack, weigh them on to my shoulders to keep me down?"

"Indeed I would not dream of doing any such thing," said Estercel, still patting her gently on the shoulder and trying to soothe her. "Do not let there be any more strife between us. Let us think rather of how we may get the ring. Would it not be a wise plan to lift the father's mark and carry it a little way up the river?"

Though her heart was still sore Sabia smiled faintly. "There could not be a better plan," said she; "but first let us look and see if any strange boy is in sight."

Estercel stepped up the bank and looked out to left and right, and there sure enough was a tall youth dressed in the loose Irish shirt or tunic of yellow linen belted round the loins coming whistling along the river bank, his eyes on the water's edge.

"I will deal with him, Sabia," said Estercel. "When I have got him away, do you come out of the bushes

and change the mark. I do not think the stone is a heavy one."

With a cheerful and open countenance Estercel strolled away to meet the youth; he accosted him in a friendly way, and hearing that he was come down to fish the river he invited him up to Ardhoroe to refresh himself. The lad first seemed disinclined to go, but Estercel persuaded him powerfully, dwelling especially on the strength and sweetness of the mead of Ardhoroe. On the way thither he asked after the health of the lad's father and mother, of his grandmother and all his relations; he questioned him also on the subject of his religion, but the lad was very guarded in his answers, and pretended he had not seen Father Machen since the Sunday before at Mass.

Leaving him in the midst of plenty, Estercel hurried away down to the river to find Sabia. He met her coming up from the water.

"He is safe for half-an-hour at least," said Estercel. "Will you sit under the oaks there and keep watch—you can see both the castle and the river—if you should see him coming down, tie your kerchief to a bough of the tree."

Then Estercel bounded down the hill and a minute after there was a great commotion in the river. It looked as though a monstrous fish were gambolling in the pool, throwing up the water in sheets of spray. Again and again he dived: then Sabia heard a shout and he left the stream.

A few minutes more and he had climbed to her side, shaking his hair that streamed with wet, and holding the ring in his hand. Sabia rose up to meet him and looked curiously at the ring which she had never thought to see

again. Even the form of it seemed altered and another thing.

"I suppose it is the same ring," she said. "It looks different to me."

"So it is to me," he said. "The charm, you know, is gone from it. Perhaps that is why. But let us move further in under the oaks. I would not have the lad see me as he comes down."

They sat down comfortably together. Estercel laid the ring on a stone before them and together they looked at it, thinking of all that had come and gone since first it was placed on his finger.

Then they fell to talking of the town and its stone-paved ways and houses that flung back the noise upon the ear; of the wonderful ranks and ranks of gorgeous gentlemen; of the terror of the cannon; of the beauty and the kingly state of Essex; of the misery of the camps; of the narrow cells of the gaol and the men of noble birth who groaned and wept within them.

While they talked the lad in the yellow tunic was seen by them going down towards the river, his rod in his hand. They kept close beneath their tree and at last they had the pleasure of seeing him diving in the river some forty paces away from the pool. While he thrashed the river vainly up and down, the two in the grove talked sweetly together. It was late in the afternoon when they rose to go.

Estercel lifted up the ring and hesitated a moment as he stood holding it in his hand. Then he spoke:

"Sabia, the charm is broken now; the ring is all cold from the water: will you set a kiss upon it for another charm?"

CHAPTER XXXIV

CHILDREN OF FAMINE

ESTERCEL and his troop rode south to join the musters for O'Neil's war. A small fine rain was falling—through it shone the bright steel of lance heads and battle axes, and the many-coloured garments of the horsemen; all picked men and athletes they were who sang as they rode or turned in their saddles to listen to the music of the pipes that followed; or they laughed and shouted with the band of runners who leaped as they ran, showing off their deep chests and their muscles of steel.

In front of Estercel rode Sabia's father, eagerly talking with two other chieftains of his own age and standing. Estercel had ridden alongside of them at first, but he was never very ready with his tongue and so had gradually fallen behind, content with his own thoughts. Tamburlaine understood his thoughts, every one: when Estercel thought of the battle, the fierceness of his heart would start out along nerve and muscle, till he quivered and hardened with the strain and sat there a man of steel, cased in the thousand steel rings of his suit of Spanish chain mail. Then the horse would feel the strong stiffening of the man and he would plunge and bound, longing for the leave of the rein and the scream of the slaughtered. Again Estercel would think of the riverside and the woods of Ardhoroe; then his soul would leave his body and flee backwards,

and the horse would feel the listless hand on the dropping rein; and he too would give himself up to remembering the slopes of Slieve Gallion, the galloping hoofs of the mare that sped beside him in equal race, and the joy of the free life.

Who has ever rightly considered the subtle entrance of the beloved into the soul? Ponder it over a thousand times, express it or seek to express it in a thousand ways, it remains an incommunicable mystery, or chain of mysteries, linking the worlds.

As the brown bird comes to the tree and sings in the heart of the leafage, so this brown girl had slipped into the kingdom of his thought. Did he think of hunting the bright deer along the autumn hill, soon his dream hand would slacken on the rein and the chase sink away, while he watched the figure of Sabia coming down the hill. Sometimes one spoke to him and he would wake to find that he had been wandering with her by the river, or listening to her harp as she played at the fireside. Once his memory had been open and free, now it was never safe from her; she was for ever entering and making herself at home. And this had not happened all at once; at first she had come but seldom, and stayed but a little time, either in his waking thoughts or in his dreams. Then oftener and oftener she began to come till now she never went really away: her figure appeared clothed in an increasingly bright light; her imagined tones grew sweeter, more appealing, and with ever greater pleasure did he learn to respond: now while he did his man's work he felt she was there always, waiting for him in his dreams.

As the troop rode through the lands of Cremorne on their way into Ferney it happened that, towards after-

noon, Estercel's friend Calvagh of the Brasils waited for their coming with his men: and thereafter Estercel rode at his side and a little apart from the rest. Calvagh was a young man of great endowments; he had the makings in him of many excellent men; it was impossible to imagine a better warrior than he; and if he had not been a warrior, a good saint was in him; and if he had been neither warrior nor priest, he would have been renowned as a bard for he understood all the difficulties and intricacies of verse composition: he was an excellent tale-teller, and his sweetness of voice was wonderful. When there was nothing else to do, he used to carve heads of men and animals on the butts of spears. And with it all he was a person of great modesty; probably because his gifts were derived straight from heaven and not produced and fostered by his own exertions or the exertions of those who had brought him up. It was a pleasure to Estercel to ride at the side of this man either in silence or listening to his conversation; for it seemed to Estercel that he understood the mysteries of earth and heaven more clearly and quickly than other men.

They had left the open fields where the plentiful harvest was showing more gold than green and had ridden, say, half a mile through a shady wood when Estercel saw some movement among the trees of the wood's edge at his right hand: a touch on the bridle brought Tamburlaine to a stand while he peered through the wood. Some strange brown animal seemed to be crawling along with smaller ones collected about it. Calvagh, too, checked his horse and then leaped down; Estercel did the same. Seeing them come, the creatures, whatever they were, crawled into a bush and became

still. The young men came on and parted the branches, when six pairs of large human eyes of varying shades of blue looked out of them; most beautiful were the eyes, like still pools of heaven behind fringed curtains; but terrible was the sight of all the rest of that woeful family; for mother and children chattered together with fear, and even while gazing upward the naked children strove to hide themselves under the tattered mantle of the mother who herself had no other garment. Famine was carved on their bodies, terror had dragged their faces across. The woman tried to hide herself, but she could not hide her sores, nor her bleeding feet and knees.

"Where do you come from, poor woman dear?" asked Calvagh.

The woman only made a sound like an animal, and the children all cried aloud together, but a quick motion of the mother silenced them and they cowered together like a covey of young partridges when the reapers enter the corn; only the lovely eyes, ten stars of blue, still kept gazing on.

"Speak, my dear," said Estercel, "we will neither hurt nor harm you. Where are you from?"

The woman moistened her dry lips and spoke.

"Noble youths," she said, in a dialect of the south, "I am a free woman, the wife of a free man of Assaroe, and the Foreigners came against us and slew, robbed, and burned: my husband they killed, me they treated with indignity, my children were beaten. Our cattle were stolen, our corn they ripped from the ground with the sword, our house was burned. Not a blade of corn is left in the land of the south. Therefore, that my children may live and not die like the others, I am come

hither, and further yet I must travel to the king of all Ireland, O'Neil himself, that I may plead my cause to him. I can no longer go upon my feet and I purpose, with the help of God, to go upon my knees and Angus, whose is the youngest, rides upon my back. Seven children I had when I started, five remain to me, and Sheila here is sick."

Neither Calvagh nor Estercel had ever seen wild famine and nakedness before; the province of Ulster had been like a still pool of peace, guarded by her mountain ramparts and her brave men. Estercel, it is true, had seen ugly sights among the camp-followers of Dublin, but never anything like this. The hoarse and hollow voice of the woman, her extreme unsightliness, sickened his heart.

Estercel went to the bag that hung by his saddle, and taking from it some wheaten cakes threw them into the bush, and watched while the woman and her children tore and devoured them, but Calvagh stood looking on the ground.

"What say you, Estercel?" he said at last; "it is not far to the nuns of Ferney—an hour's ride at most. Shall we charge these creatures of God on the backs of our horses and place them in the hands of the good women?"

Estercel blushed red: he was afraid that he would be seen by the troops of fighting men on their way to the mustering place. What if they should cross the path of O'Donnell's army of three thousand men and be seen by them?

"It is very doubtful," he said at last, "if Tamburlaine would permit people of that description to get upon his back."

"Do you speak to him," said Calvagh, "as you know so well how to do and he will be sure to listen."

Reluctantly Estercel turned and spoke in the ear of Tamburlaine; fortunately it happened that the horse had had enough exercise to satisfy him and was in a mood to practise a peaceable charity.

"I will take the mother and the sick one," said Calvagh; "do you take the remaining four," for he saw that his friend had a horror of the woman.

Estercel was relieved, and in a few minutes the two young men were striding along side by side leading their horses. The brown horse of Calvagh was led on a loose rein, but Tamburlaine followed like a dog, his nose now in his master's pocket, now on his shoulder, a row of skeleton children on his back, two on the saddle, one behind and one before, their arms about each other's waists. It was good to see how carefully he stepped, how he would balance his step over the rough places to keep an even seat for the creatures who clung upon him.

Calvagh had wrapped his own mantle about the woman, and every five minutes or so she would lean sideways over to call down blessings upon him and also to enumerate in hoarse and panting breaths all the fine things she had in her house before it was burnt and ruin came upon her.

Estercel suffered much shame as he went along, but Calvagh, being older and wiser, was but little troubled.

"It is a new thing," said Estercel, "for us and our war-horses to be carrying women and beggars."

Calvagh glanced up. "Our horses are quite indifferent," he said. "And these people are not beggars for they asked nothing. Their sores and their hunger

asked for them. Come, Estercel, you must pardon me. I saw the stars of heaven in the eyes of the children, and I could not leave them in the bush. We should have pity, for we may come to need it."

"That is true," said Estercel, and he walked sombrely along, reflecting on many things and more especially remembering his own great need in the past and the queer look he must have had at one time.

They met no troops of soldiers at all on their way to the little valley of the nuns, for they were out of the direct road to the camping ground. It was a pretty place, wooded hills stood round it, the bell of the stone chapel was pealing down below among the loaded apple-trees and the well-tilled gardens. There were no walls; the protection of the valley was its charity and sanctity. The nuns were real labouring women, good and pure. Their wealth was wealth of apples, honey, and corn. Their only luxury, embroidered cloths for the little chapel. So simple and so humble was the little settlement, and so nicely hidden away, that no rattling fine captain of Elizabeth's had as yet picked it out and marked it as his prey.

Round about the chapel stood the huts of the nuns; in answer to Calvagh's call, they came hastening, white as a flock of sea-mews in the sun. The mother was a broad woman, broad-faced, with strong lines of sternness mingled with benignity marked about the mouth. To her Calvagh addressed himself, while Estercel reverently considered the faces of varying feature, yet all alike shining with pity, that crowded behind her.

When at last he saw a young nun, rose-faced, receive the sick child into her arms, covering it with a fold of her gown while a tear ran upon her cheeks, the child

itself took on a new aspect as though it were a singular and precious thing lost and found. When he saw two tall nuns carry away between them the emaciated woman covered in a cloak, something stirred in him, he knew not what. So might the angels one day receive his weary soul.

As they rode away again Estercel was the first to speak.

"Those women put the world to shame," said he. "I am very thankful to you, Calvagh. I would never have done that good deed myself, but I know well that the thought that I had not done it would have tormented me long enough."

"Ah, well, the poor thing was battling hard for her children," said Calvagh. "I thought it a pity not to help her. I could not think shame. Rather it is to me as though we had this day carried Mary and the Child."

In silence they rode along, then Estercel said: "Calvagh, how is it that with such a spirit as there is in you, still you follow rough war?"

"Faith, I don't know," answered Calvagh, smiling. "He knows that set the horns on the stag and curled the bull's forehead. What? Erin in danger and my two hands muffled in a monk's frock? That would not be natural."

Evening was now beginning to fall and the two men rode fast, anxious to rejoin their troop.

It was dusk when they entered the long avenues of the woods of Ferney, the appointed meeting-place. Encouraged by dim light and the slow pace at which they rode, Estercel opened his heart to his friend.

"Calvagh," he said in cautious tones, "did ever you love a woman?"

Calvagh looked straight before him, watching the brown tree trunks slipping past in the grey light, defiling and twining, a solemn Druid people in an endless religious dance.

"Why do you ask me that?" he said at last.

"I wanted your opinion," he answered, "because I do not know if I love or not; and what is more I do not know if I want to love or not."

"Do not trouble about it," said Calvagh; "nor even think about it at all. There is no love where you can say, 'I will love or I will not.'"

"But that is where the mischief is," Estercel answered. "I am rid to death with it. You say do not think about it at all and I cannot get one person out of my thoughts. There she is continually, and in my dreams also, and not by will of mine. Did such a thing ever happen to you?"

"Let us hurry on," said Calvagh, "it grows late and darker every moment."

Their horses had by this time become used to the dusky twilight and took to a rapid trot, and as they went the low voice of Calvagh murmured above his horse's ears:

"Oh bitter piercing sting of death, here is my heart for thee,
Outmatch the bitterer sting of love, the way I shall go free."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE REVENGE OF TAMBURLAINE

TAMBURLAINE had an extra feed of the precious oats from his master that night because of the peaceable charity he had shown towards the four starved children; he that would suffer no man upon his back except his master had endured to have these lamentable creatures riding upon him and had proved himself capable of a Christian mildness. Both horse and master were objects of much pride and affection, and it followed that two days after their arrival Estercel was chosen out to join a picked troop of fifty horse that were Tyrone's bodyguard.

Because of the great swiftmess and power of Tamburlaine they were deputed to bring news of the approach of Essex and his army. More than once Estercel had to gallop for his life before bands of Essex's horse thrown out to reconnoitre. Sometimes he caught sight of the plumes and helmets of the main army and then his heart would bound in his breast as he thought of the coming struggle; at each spring of his horse making homeward across the hills the joy of freedom would run in his veins like a clear draught from the wells of life; and the image of the brown girl would rise before him, awaking his soul.

Little by little the army of Essex drew on. Who does not know of the meeting between these two leaders, Essex and Tyrone, the most honourable men of their

day? Neither poisoner, torturer, bribe-taker, nor word-breaker was Essex. Nor was Tyrone. But while the last was a wise and foreseeing leader of men playing to its utmost advantage an inevitably losing game—the game of the small against the large—the first was a creature without prudence whose gusty emotions fooled his will.

Yet it was one of the purest wills of his time; see his letter to the Privy Council: “Only your lordships must and will pity Ireland and pity the army committed to my charge.” Pity indeed? When the gun is aimed at the red deer, who pities shot or stag? And if the finger trembles on the trigger, of what account is the spent shot?

It was on the eighth day of August that these two enemies met on either side of the ford of Bellaclynthe. It was a picture full of colour and splendour of life: the hills and woods, the orange-tawny-coated horsemen, the white-coated infantry, the plumed helmets of the officers, the glancing of the weapons, the shining groups that surrounded Essex. On the other side, the body-guard of Tyrone in steel helmets and cuirasses occupied a hill, a continual fluttering movement among them caused by the stamping and chafing of their high-mettled horses. Among them, the observed of many, stood Tamburlaine, still as a statue, his neck raised, snuffing the wind that came across the river, charged with the scent of a foreign soldiery. As he blew through his nostrils he thought deeply, remembering his enemies, his imprisonment, and his misery.

Then it was that, seeing all the array of Tyrone’s army, that Essex conceived the idea of treating with him as an ally. He “pitied Ireland”; instead of a wasted mourn-

ing famine-stricken country, he saw a fair and prosperous land united under one wise and strong leader. In that he was capable of such a vision he proved himself a statesman; but at the same time he thought himself stronger than he was. He did not judge that right needs to go armed with a triple strong armour; ay, and even the two-edged sword of justice doubly sharpened in her hand and the bird of Athene on her shoulder to speak a straight counselling in her ear. Right, mild and gentle, never won aught in the kingdoms of this bloody world. Even Christ came to his own, not by his doctrine, but by the shock of mortal encounter with opposing force.

Those were violent times; times when men might see an aged and saintly bishop dangling from the end of a rope in the market-place merely because he was a bishop and pious. There were violent passions brewing in the palace of Nonsuch that boded no good for Essex.

Down he rode to the ford, generous, over-confident, carrying gifts and honours in his hand that were no more real than dead-sea apples. Seeing him coming Tyrone galloped his horse down the banks and urged him into the water till he stood shoulder-high. Then the two met and in deadly earnest spoke for near an hour. Cecil's friends on the hillsides beyond smiled together. "Treason, treason!" they cried. "We have him now. He is plotting alone with the arch-traitor out of our hearing."

Historians have wondered on what they conversed. The wonder is that an hour sufficed; were not all the proofs of Cecil's treachery in Tyrone's hand to show to Essex? Had not Tyrone's sworn men on the Dublin council been approached with Cecil's bribes? Were not Essex's officers creatures of Cecil's? Had not nineteen

of them petitioned Essex in writing against this very expedition, in flat defiance of the queen's commands? Think of all Tyrone would have to say and urge: James of Scotland was his friend; the whole sympathy of Christian Europe was at his back. "Get but the queen's ear, she loves you well," he would say. "Oust Cecil and the Cecilians. I will govern here as your man, you in England as the queen's minister, and you and England will be powerful as England never was before."

Elizabeth would have been well pleased if Essex had shot Tyrone as he stood in the water; why keep faith with a base bush kern, an idol, a golden calf? She was to be very little pleased when she heard of the treaty concluded next day: a treaty of peace which was hailed on both sides with an outburst of joy.

Yet it was on that same day that Estercel suffered one of the sorest griefs of his life; he lost faith in his horse. Having got a pass from Tyrone, he crossed over to greet Sir Henry Harrington who had sent him a message, desiring to speak with him. Estercel, in fine spirits because of the general rejoicing in the camp, came down to the ford with Tamburlaine behind him, leaped on his back to cross the water, and then took his way over to the hillside which was covered with the tents of the English troops. Tamburlaine followed on up the hill. Estercel looked back at him once and seeing his eyes were somewhat wild and his look nervous and troubled he bade him return across the water; but this Tamburlaine would not do. He came forward and laid his head on his master's shoulder, saying quite plainly: "I smell old dangers. It is not possible for me to leave you."

A trooper with simple red cheeks that spoke of the

plough led them to Sir Henry Harrington's tent, and there in the door stood that friendly person, with a volume of his translations from Ariosto under his arm.

"As I'm a Christian," he said to Estercel, "the pair of you are more splendid than ever. I have had a commission," he went on, "to see you myself and report upon your condition. A certain person will be glad to hear of your good health. For some reason, because I fancy of idle words let slip, she conceived herself to be the cause of your imprisonment."

"Most certainly," said Estercel gravely, "she was the cause of my release. Perhaps," he went on, "you can give me news of her. I have often wished to know if she did well where she was going."

Sir Henry Harrington laughed. "She has come to great preferment," said he. "She is become one of her majesty's maids of honour. Her majesty was pleased to say that the lady reminded her of her own youth being of the same complexion."

"And is she happy in that office?" asked Estercel.

"The great Eliza is a very lioness," said Sir Henry, laughing. "She hath a mighty paw. Many is the brave slap the fair cheek of Mistress Meraud has come by. And being a tempestuous damsel I am told she bears it ill. The court is not what it was. Own godson of her majesty's as I am, I am afraid to go near her. But God bless my soul, man, what is the matter with your dragon of a horse?"

Estercel turned round; one glance was enough; he rushed to the side of Tamburlaine and seizing the bridle wrenched upon it. The aspect of the animal was grown terrific: every hair upon his neck stood up stiff. There was no wind stirring, yet the locks of his mane rippled

and waved. His ears were laid back and every tooth in his head showed in his open red mouth. Estercel knew the signs of his battle fury; in deadly anxiety he wrestled with him in silence, forcing down the jaw by means of the powerful bit, striking him again and again with flat hand in the face. With this rage upon him if he were loosed among the tents and the picketed horses he would trample and scatter all before him.

A crowd soon gathered to watch the silent battle; it did not last long, for the creature, whatever it was, that had kindled the wrath of Tamburlaine had quickly vanished. Estercel knew well that his strength would be no more than straw against him were he once fully roused; his relief was great when he found the fixed fury of the animal slowly relaxing, the hairs beginning to lie once more upon his rough neck. Then he turned his attention to the outer ring of the crowd; but saw nothing that suggested a possible cause. He was not sure but that he saw the thin legs and peculiar physiognomy of Sir Xylonides Bullen at the back of the crowd. If it was so, he vanished at the next moment. The voice of Sir Henry Harrington came from the interior of the tent.

"Fair young sir," said he, "may I beg you to remove that apocalyptic beast from my neighbourhood? I shall report favourably on the physical condition of both of you. I had looked forward with pleasure to reading you passages from my translation of the *Orlando Furioso*, but at present I am only anxious for the departure of your obnoxious satellite."

A crowd followed Estercel as he left the tent, seeing which he leaped on the back of Tamburlaine and galloped down to the river, crossed the ford, and away for a wild

gallop along the woodside, often speaking bitterly in the ear of his horse as he rode.

That same afternoon Estercel walked and talked with Calvagh along the river banks; their horses followed them on a loose rein.

Suddenly Estercel felt the rein pulled from his hand; he turned round, and there was Tamburlaine once more transfigured by rage, mouth open, his head and neck stretched out straight and stiff. Estercel made one spring for his bridle, but the horse bounded into the air, all four hoofs at once, and with a scream rushed by him.

A tall man in leather jacket and breeches was going along before them, at some distance off. Seeing the horse make like an arrow in his direction, Estercel shouted aloud in warning. The man, who had paid no attention to the noise of hoofs behind, turned now, and seeing the frightful beast so close threw up his arms and, shrieking, turned to run.

But the horse was upon him, his broad chest struck him down, and he rolled on the ground. Calvagh and Estercel were both swift runners, but there was no time for them to save him; the speed of Tamburlaine was the speed of the thunderbolt. They saw him rear himself up and descend again, trampling the shrieking man.

When they reached his side there he was, quietly sniffing at his helpless prey. Seeing his master come, he raised his head, trotted a little distance off, and began to crop the grass.

Now the woods were full of O'Neil's camping soldiery. On hearing the outcry, more and more men ran out from among the trees, making a ring about the dead man; they stripped him to find his injuries; there,

right above his heart, was the crushing print of the horse's hoof, an almost incredible spectacle. There was no other mark upon him at all. More and more doubtful grew the faces of the men; not one of them but knew the horse; not one of them but knew the story of his famous ride; yet here was something quite intolerable.

A peculiar shadow falls upon a beast who has shed man's blood. He becomes a murderer. A stain is on him, and men look at him with horror. Tamburlaine was quite unconscious of the glances sent in his direction. But Estercel felt them all like a knife in his heart. An officer of O'Donnell's was among the crowd and he said gravely to Estercel:

"Did your horse ever do the like of this before?"

"Never in his life," said Estercel.

"Well, he mustn't do it again, that's all," answered he.

"Life isn't safe with him," said another.

"Does any one here recognise this man?" asked Calvagh.

The outside men crowded into the ring, but no one could say they knew him or had seen him at any time.

"If he was only a Foreigner you could excuse the horse," said one, "for he knows them for enemies and he has been bred a fighter as we all know. But this man is Irish. From the cut of his jacket and breeches I would say he belonged to the south."

"As they grow older, these great-horses are apt to become terrors," said one.

"Ah, you can't keep a horse like that," said another, stirring the dead man with his foot.

Estercel turned aside, grief in his heart.

"He'll have to be shot," said another.

"Owen himself says he's terrible revengeful. He once gave him a slap in the face and he never forgave him because he wasn't the master."

"Where's Owen now?" said the officer. "Let us hear what he has to say."

With shout and whistle that ran along the woods, sent on from one to another, Owen was called. Presently he came running, out of breath, shocked to the heart with what he heard and all on fire to take the horse's part. He pushed his way into the ring and, kneeling down, examined the dead man.

"God Almighty," he exclaimed, "here's a vengeance! right on the heart! He's smashed his very heart! It's more than mortal. He has more sense than a man. Shoot him, did you say? Shoot me first. Ah, he's done well. Do I know the man? Ay, do I! I'd know him among a hundred though I saw him but once."

Then on his knee by the dead man, while the dense ring closed round, Owen told the story of how he had freed the horse and the persecuted state in which he had found him, of how they were pursued and he and the horse had hidden and watched this man and two others run down the street in the moonlight; of how the hair had risen on the horse's neck and he had grinned and laughed when the man had run by. Estercel had drawn near to hear. Owen stopped and pointed at the face.

"Now," said he, "look at the red head of him: look at that big nose. That's a face you wouldn't soon forget. And that horse has the memory of ten men and the scent of a trained hound. He saw him and marked him down in the camp: didn't Estercel here tell me of it

when he came back? Saw him and marked him down and here he lies. As a spy and a traitor he was coming creeping among us, and he's met his fate, well deserved!" and as he spoke, Owen rose up and kicked the dead man with his foot. "The horse is a lesson to us," he said. "Ay, if I could meet with the master of this man, him that betrayed and tortured Estercel, I'd do as the horse did, give it him right on the heart; and too good a death in the end!"

A murmur of approval followed Owen's words; then the officer spoke:

"Listen all," he said. "This may be a bad piece of work for us. What about breaking the truce? It's only a horse that has broken it and the sign and seal of it is on the man's breast; but the other side wouldn't believe this, not if we swore it on the cross. Are we all true men here? Look in each other's face and see that there are no creeping intelligencers among us. Are you all O'Donnell's men or O'Neil's? Raise up your right hand, you that are." Every hand was raised. "Well, then, I say bury this man where he lies and quickly: let him go to eternity with that mark upon him. And do you keep silence on what has occurred. Let the spy tell on himself if he can. Is that right, Estercel?"

"Right," answered he.

Soon the earth was smooth and green over what had been a living man but one short hour before.

With head bent and folded arms Estercel walked away from the spot and the white horse followed behind him. His good name had been cleared; yet there was a sort of terror in men's minds as they watched him go. A plummy vengeance waved upon his forehead and that forehoof of his appeared like the hammer of Thor.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE RETURN

MANY are the wonders of love. Light-bringer, light-giver, how does it not enlarge and illuminate the borders of the soul?

As Estercel camped in the woods of Ferney and watched the dawn glide from pillar to pillar of his green-roofed tent, a fountain of life and joy sprang up within him, and pouring abroad upon the visible world met and lit the dawn-light with another lustre.

Estercel was a powerful man, but he was clean and pure. He had lived close to natural things, and natural forces had their way with him. From the moment when he had, of his own free will, replaced the ring upon his finger, some barrier of pride or obstinacy or superstition was broken down. He no longer feared a mysterious enchantment that coerced him; and as soon as he ceased to resist, the natural enchantment had its way.

More and more vivid with light grew the figure of the young girl within his remembrance: bright as a star grew the fields of Ardhoree. And this brilliance that was from within now began to pour forth and light up the hills of Ferney and the flat table-lands of Cremorne, where he and Tamburlaine galloped together.

Then he came down among his fellows and laughed and wrestled and played; though his strength was great, so also was his good-nature. He never grew angry in his play or flung his man to hurt him, and though men

laughed to see him, yet his games passed as part of the general joy that filled all men at the thought of a united country and a splendid alliance.

The treaty concluded, Essex and his army withdrew to the southward. Already his baiting and his agony had begun, he was like a man caught in the outer circles of a whirlpool who goes softly enough in the beginning, but for whom waits the horror of the central gulf.

Soon he was to take that swift and secret journey to the English court; soon he was to see the backs of all his friends; he was to find the hand of the old woman that loved him use a whip to strike him; he was to know his wife beset for money bribes by sham gentlemen while she lay in bed with her young babe; he was to see the wise man Bacon whom he had long befriended become so very wise as to plead before the kingdom for the death of the man that had helped him. He was to feel the final madness of revolt and fury, the worse bitterness of a weak humiliation. An honest and generous fool among intriguers, it was to be his fate to die a thousand deaths in one.

The Ulstermen turned their faces once more to the blue mountains they loved. Behind those mountains lay Ardhoroe. Runners had already gone out with the news of the truce: by hundreds they had started on paths that radiated as wide as Ireland. Like a darting sun-ray each man sped, scattering rejoicings as he went, drying up the tears of the women whose hearts had beat in pain night and day since their men had gone out.

Among a thousand women not one would you find that had suffered more than Sabia. She had made sure that in the great battle that they looked for all she loved would go down.

When the noise of the horses and the fighting men and the war-pipes had passed a stillness like that of death settled down on Ardhroe. In late August the very mountains seem to drowse. The forests are quiet unless a great wind comes to shake them: there is no more fluttering and pushing of young leaves, no more bird songs: the heavy vans of leafage sleep in the sun. Distance hangs her sapphire veils about the hills and the borders of the woods.

On a morning after the men were gone Sabia went along the woodside following the way they had taken. Clear enough were their tracks upon the path. The little green things of the earth still shuddered where the heavy hoof-marks had been. She pitied them where they lay prostrate, mutely resentful of the dreaded brood whose hoofs and grinding teeth and wrenching tongues are the destroyers of their morning joy.

From among the others she began to seek out the hoof-prints of Tamburlaine, and she soon found them; she had seen him leap and bound by the wood path as he and his rider turned out of sight; there was the place, the gashes in the turf showing where his hoofs had dashed out two foot long of soil with its green carpeting. A little way on and he began to go more soberly, each hoof-mark wider by half an inch than that of any other horse, plain and distinct in the soft turf. She knelt down by one and examined it; what a world of small green life lay crushed down within the compass of a three-quarter circlet. She lifted up the little crushed heads, a bit of sorrel, a tiny eye-bright, our lady's bedstraw, a few grass blades, a tuft of moss, a little wild strawberry plant; all dashed down by the weight of the horse. Unsheathing the knife that hung at her belt, Sabia

cut out a sod containing the perfect hoof-print and carried it in her two hands back to the house where she sought out an earthen platter to hold it. She took it to her own chamber, where she placed it in the narrow window. She was tenderly watering and lifting up the bruised stems of the tiny plants when her nurse entered the room.

"What's that you've got there, my honey love?" said the old woman inquisitively. Sabia did not answer, so she came over and looked at the platter. "God bless the child, but that's the funny window-garden. I see, I see it all. May the saints watch over the horse and the rider. There should be a charm in that. If you were to say a blessing on it night and morning, may be it would bring hoof and rider safe home. Sure a bit of rag is no more than a hoof-print and the well water beyond will cast out disease by the help of that same as everybody knows. Yes, yes, a charm there must be."

"I never thought of a charm, nurse," said Sabia sadly. "I only thought perhaps it was the last of him I might ever see."

With her fingers she lifted up the little crushed green things, so delicate, so pretty. In her thought she made herself one with them and imagined them standing in the early light, trembling as the earth throbbed beneath them to the sound of the coming riders.

From this reverie she was interrupted by an exclamation from her nurse, who was craning her neck in the narrow window.

"Saints in glory!" said she, "what is this I behold on the road to the castle?"

Alarmed by her tone, Sabia ran to look out. A procession of two jennets and two donkeys was winding

along the lower road, with what appeared to be a bundle of clothes upon each, and each animal led by a man.

"Oh, woe is me!" cried Sabia. "Alas and alas! It is my two aunts, and by the great size of their bundles they are surely come to stay. My father has certainly broken faith; he promised me they should not again be inflicted upon me."

"Comfort yourself, my lamb. Is not your old nurse rich in expedients? Shall I be able to charm away a wart and not do the same for these ladies of good pedigree?"

Sabia half smiled; she saw possibilities of mirth in her nurse's suggestion; then she shook her head and sighed.

"What matters a lesser affliction where there is already a great one?" said she. "Where gold and silver are gone, let the copper go after them. I know how it will be. Drive, drive at the spinning wheel. And the loom, oh, day and night we shall be at the weaving. And time for it too; there are but two rolls of the woollen cloth and two of the linen left in the house."

Thereafter so great was the activity in the great hall and in the barn below that not a minute was left to any woman for idle grieving. The two tall spinster sisters in their lemon-yellow robes with red handkerchiefs tied upon their scanty grey locks presided over the dyeing vats and the loom. Companies of pretty bare-footed maids came up to Ardhoroe in the dawn; the sheds where they cleaned and combed the wool and the barn where they spun were as full of songs as a hedge in springtime, for the mistresses of labour knew well that all work goes ten times better to a song.

Yet the hearts of many of the singers were as heavy as

lead within; they might forget themselves for an hour in the merry work, but ever and again you would see one stop and her face grow white while she pressed her hand to her heart where Dread pastured her feeding flocks.

So passed the last weeks of August and the first days of September. The little herbs had grown tall and strong in the hoof-print of Tamburlaine. The weaving went on rapidly; the looms turned off hundreds of yards of sound and beautiful woollen stuffs, a noble provision against the winter cold. Brighter and brighter grew the corn; at evening the red grain within the ears shone crimson in the horizontal rays of the sunset.

Old men and boys and strong women went out to view it; this year the corn harvest would be theirs to reap. The next day being a clear dawn they assembled and the ranks of the corn began to fall before the long row of the sickles. At the end of each rank when the workers stopped to sharpen their sickles, first one and then another would turn to shade their eyes and look down the long paths that led southward to the openings of the hills. Great news, fearful news, might be already on the way, running towards them on swift feet. Not one of them but had the thought that out from that blue gateway might one day appear the plume and polished helmet of some terrible foreign captain; what would happen to them then? Agony, misery, beggary; that was what followed in their wake. War they were used to: what mattered a good hard fight between friends and neighbours? What else were men for? Unless they were monks? But robbery and extermination, that was a different tale; that was the black thought at the bottom of the foreigners' war.

Up from Dungannon came the first news to these troubled hearts. Hardly had Tyrone met Essex in the stream by Bellaclynthe before the news was flying to the north. When the runners were weary a fresh man would take up the message and further north it was shouted from hill to hill. Whatever person heard it would catch it up and run with it, then shout it forwards to another who himself ran again, so that not the swiftest winged bird could travel as fast as the news.

Such a shout came to the reapers in the cornfields, such a shout came to the ears of Sabia as she watched on the castle-top. Imagine it! the voice of joy coming out of the south, out of the unknown, out of the untravelled future! Women fell weeping on each other's necks; children hung upon their skirts and begged the news of them.

Before that loud cry, sounding like a trumpet among the hills, all grief fled and rejoicing burst out.

Fear is a silent creature. A man or woman or child that is in fear goes about quietly. Fear feeds on the heart, so that life is sickened at the source. When fear is gone, the blood springs again; the feet go naturally to dancing, the mouth to song.

On that September day many a dusty harp saw the light, to be stringed and tuned afresh; not war-songs now, but love songs and hero songs were sung.

The big chests were opened and holiday garments of bright colours were taken out ready to welcome the men of the north on their return. That day and next day and the next, runners came in bringing more and more news. The army was on the move, the men of the north were coming home.

The women had no time for sleep—just an hour here

or an hour there, what did it matter? Those men were coming home who might have been returned to them bloody, broken, or never at all. Therefore in every house and hut the beds were laid smooth for them, the feast made ready, the cup filled, and the clean garment prepared.

At Ardhoroe, Sabia worked and sang with the rest; her eyes scarcely saw the visible world; they were bent solely upon the future which was now turned to gold. When the white horse and his rider came out of the misty south, along the hill paths, and up the borders of the woods, she saw them translated into another world that was hung midway between visible and invisible, a world where the dream is a substantial thing, dominating the solid, controlling the issues of life.

CHAPTER XXXVII

BREAD AND HONEY

IN the early morning Sabia stole out of doors, a filled basket on her arm. The noise of the feasting, the feet of the dance, the throbbing of the harps still drummed in her ears. Her whole being was vibrating; she seemed to hear the pulsation of her own blood like a bell ringing far away that called her to a high ceremony.

Out of doors was silence. The first of the September mists swam like a white sea, fifteen feet deep upon the ground. The round tops of hills and trees rose up islanded in a lake of milk. Especially upon the river the mist rolled in heavy fleeces, white as snow.

Descending the castled hill, Sabia plunged into the chill white fog: it cooled her soon; every leaf shook down its moisture upon her as she passed. Not a sound could be heard. After the noise and shouting of the night before, it seemed as if earth herself slept, having drawn white coverlids about her face.

Sabia made her way to the top of a hill that she had noticed a little way off as standing out of the mist. Once there she was glad to wrap herself in the folds of her good blue mantle while she sat leaning against a birch tree, waiting for the sun to break forth. Already the upper heavens were filmy blue and the trembling borders of the mist were beginning to rise and flee.

It cannot be said that she was altogether surprised when a shimmering and movement broke the curtain

of vapour and the white horse's head appeared followed by the figure of Estercel walking by his shoulder.

Sabia rose and stood by the birch tree.

"Good morning to you, Estercel," said she. "Ah, send the horse away. I am frightened of him since I heard the tale of his killing."

Estercel stood a little distance off; the horse stood, too, his neck stretched out, his eyes regarding the girl by the tree.

"Send him away," she repeated; "if you saw his face now as he looks at me! there is too much sense in it."

"I am sorry you are afraid of him," said Estercel. "I felt that way myself at first. I did not want to have him near me. But he grieved so much that I soon forgave him. Look at him now; he is fretting directly." And in truth the horse's head was drooping down.

"But to kill!" said the girl; "it was very bad of him."

"He is no worse than a man," answered the other. They stood in silence for a moment.

"Sabia, do you speak a kind word to him," he went on; "he has a noble heart: do not vex him."

Doubtfully the girl looked at the vast creature; then stooping, she uncovered her basket and taking a piece of wheaten loaf from it, held it towards him without a word.

Tamburlaine lifted up his head and snuffed at it, then turned his neck away.

"His feelings are hurt," said Estercel.

"It is a wonder to see him so gentle," said she. "I had been thinking of him as quite otherwise. Indeed, I love him; there never was such a horse and never will be again. Did he not bring you home? Ah, never,

never, will I forget that day," and going to his side she flung her arms about his neck, reaching up on tip-toe to do so. Very grateful was the horse, he laid his velvet nose upon her shoulder, he snorted, he tossed his maned head up and down; finally he took the bread from her hand and ate it thankfully, for it was gently given. After which, because his heart was set at ease, he began to gambol, flinging up his heels behind.

"This is worse than all!" cried Sabia. "There is not room for such frolicking on this little hill," and as she spoke the creature reared up and pawed the blue air with his hoofs, in his strength and his whiteness and his joy, a thing fearful and beautiful to behold; knowing no bonds or imprisonment or stripes, the horse was as untamed and eager in his spirit as the creatures of the earth before the advent of the terrible races of man. He had besides, being more intelligent than his fellows, learned from his master somewhat of the mystery of human love, that love which is compounded of many ingredients—which holds within it something of the love of the wild mother for her young, with its tenderness and its fighting force; something of the affection of the ox for his yoke-fellow, something of the love of the creature of the forest for its mate, something of the half angelic passion of the birds.

Their sympathy with him and his with them lent him a splendour that was rare to see: but however much delight Estercel might take in him, his prancings were inconvenient in a narrow place, and Estercel sent him away down the hill, where he wandered, feeding, in and out of the fast fleeing veils of mist.

Left by themselves, the young man and woman became silent. Then Sabia, holding by a branch of the

birch tree and feeling as much fear as any mouse, began to talk fast in a loud cheerful voice about she knew not what.

Neither did Estercel, for he paid no attention to her words; but presently, turning about, he took her in his arms and set a kiss upon her mouth, after which she talked no more, only wept in silence within his arm. After a time, however, when he had let her go free, she became cheerful again, for the sun was growing brighter each minute and under their eyes the wreaths of vapour rose up and vanished away.

Estercel had two pieces of stick, warm and dry, in his leather satchel and with them he soon made a little flame and kindled a fire; while he did so Sabia emptied her basket and laid out a fine breakfast of bread and meat, and honey for herself. Taking the empty basket she ran quickly down the hill and soon gathered some dozens of mushrooms, for they were very plentiful in the fields about. These she strung on a long willow wand and Estercel helped her to roast them by turning the wand round and round over the flame of the wood fire.

While they ate their delicious meal, the sun shone out and the last mist wreath went up in smoke; the lovely colours of day appeared; the voice of the corn-crakes came up from the corn where it still stood, the old ones instructing the young how to save their lives from the sickle and flee before the reapers. Overhead, two larks sang in their spirals; for the larks alone are such lovers of heaven that their joy in it is as fresh as ever when the joy of the nest is done.

Estercel and Sabia, sitting together, eating bread and honey on the hill, drank in all the sweetness of life

to the uttermost. The saint who dwells in the airs of heaven sees clear and far upon the earth; so does the lover, for the resplendent light within pours out, and in its brightness other brightnesses are revealed.

Estercel looked away over hill and valley and river to where distance in her blue gown held up the finger of mystery.

"It is a fine morning," said he.

"It is indeed," said she, "and a beautiful country."

"It's a pity to think of anything bad coming to it," said he, looking down towards the blue gates of the hills.

"Ah, well," said Sabia, "that's all over now, thanks be to Him. It's grand to think of all Ireland under one name, and a roof on every church, and bread in the hand of every child."

"Don't be too sure of anything," said Estercel. "You never can tell what's going to happen. There's something deceitful to me in this peace. I heard a lot and I learned a lot down in that heart-breaking town. It's our land they're wanting to get. It's our blood they want to see: they'll make the earth run with it yet."

Sabia's bright face clouded over; then slowly it cleared again; she turned and her eye rested upon Estercel.

"Brown girl," he said, "dear brown one of my heart, shall we be married on Sunday?"

"I would rather," said she, "for us to be married some time next year or the year after."

"Sunday next is far better and so let it be," said Estercel. "You never can tell what is going to happen. Let us take our joy while we may."

"Oh, my heart!" said Sabia, "what shall I do? Why in the world did I meddle with the ring?"

"What is done is done," answered Estercel. "For

myself I am right thankful to you. The heart must have an idol, Sabia. Without love, the world is very cold and a dangerous place also. I have a feeling that the charm in the ring kept me safe while I was in that desperate Dublin."

He put an arm about her and she crept close to his side, wrapping up her fears in love.

Estercel sat looking out before him at the opening between the hills, whereby the shadows might pass in.

"Ay," he said, "the world's a dangerous place; but come what come may, we shall have each other, and the blessing of Almighty God, and our lives before us, and who can say more than that?"

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